OIL UNIONS AND DEMOCRACY IN POST-SADDAM IRAQ

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Abstract
Since the invasion of 2003, a complex array of political, religious and ethno-sectarian factions have formed civil society movements; uncensored news has been consumed across the nation; ordinary citizens have taken to the streets to protest key government decisions; and various local councils have been formed, deliberating on key decisions facing their immediate communities. Given this context, this paper focuses on the specific case of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU), Iraq’s largest and most powerful independent workers union. The IFOU has repeatedly taken the Iraqi government to task over their poor pay and the dangerous nature of their work, as well as the government’s initial kowtowing to US plans to privatise the entire Iraqi oil sector. To do this, the IFOU have utilised a variety of democratic mechanisms including peaceful strikes and protests, media campaigns and political lobbying. Such moves have met with mixed results in Baghdad – at times the central government has pandered to the requests of IFOU, but it has also gone as far as issuing arrest warrants for its senior members. The IFOU therefore serve as an interesting example of public power in Iraq and may well pose one of the greatest challenges to rising authoritarianism there.
Introduction

In March of 2003 the world’s last remaining superpower launched a pre-emptive strike on a sovereign nation without UN approval or popular domestic or global support. The justification given to the world for such an attack was twofold: Iraq was accused of harboring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and having links to Al-Qaeda, both of which could not be permitted in a post-9/11 world. However, when evidence for either Iraq’s WMDs or links to terrorism failed to emerge in the wake of the war and the nine subsequent years of military occupation, the Bush administration was forced to re-frame the war and redefine the parameters of success. To do this, the US began speaking about bringing democracy to Iraq as if it had always been one of the goals of the war itself. The notion that the US could use its superior military might to invade a sovereign state, topple an existing regime and implant democracy set a new and unfortunate precedent which has come to be termed the ‘Bush doctrine’ (Jervis, 2003).

For the first few years the project to bring democracy to Iraq had its share of successes as the Iraqi people proved themselves adept at understanding and utilizing democratic mechanisms and institutions. Almost overnight a complex array of political, religious and ethno-sectarian based civil society movements and political parties (re)emerged forming policy-driven campaigns and complex alliances; uncensored news was enthusiastically produced and consumed across the nation; protest movements agitated towards greater inclusion, diversity and debate; local councils were formed, deliberating and deciding on key decisions facing their immediate communities; and a series of nation-wide elections brought a democratically elected government to power in 2006 (Davis, 2004, 2007; Isakhan, 2008, 2011, 2012a). However, one of the unfortunate consequences of the US effort to bring democracy to Iraq was that many key ethno-religious political factions viewed it as an opportunity to pedal their own relatively narrow and very divisive political rhetoric (Davis, 2007; Isakhan, 2013). This meant that the Iraqi government was constituted not so much by a body who wanted to draw Iraq together behind a common ideology and to work towards a collective and egalitarian future, as it was by representatives who would fight on behalf of their ethno-religious constituencies.
Foremost among these, Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki gradually exposed himself as preferring the style of governance referred to in the literature on other Arab states alternatively as ‘liberalised autocracy’ (Brumberg, 2002), ‘semi-authoritarianism’ (Ottaway, 2003) or ‘pluralised authoritarianism’ (Posusney & Angrist, 2005). That is to say, that the Maliki government consolidated its incumbency while putting in place measures that can be considered more or less liberal. To do this, the regime utilised (and controlled) nominally democratic mechanisms such as elections, media freedoms, political opposition and civil society as part of their strategy to retain power. Not surprisingly, the Iraqi people have become increasingly disillusioned with their political leaders and deeply critical of their ability to provide a robust and genuine democracy – hence the mass protests that swept across Iraq in the context of the popular Arab Revolutions of 2010-12. However, these latest Iraqi protests – these mass displays of informal power - are only the most recent and overt sign of the hidden geographies that are agitating towards democracy in this deeply troubled and increasingly authoritarian state. Given this context, this chapter focuses on the specific case of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU), Iraq’s largest and most powerful independent workers union and argues that they may well be counted among the nation’s greatest bulwarks against both foreign occupation and rising authoritarianism. This chapter concludes by arguing that Iraqi citizens who play an active role in their own governance and participate in democratic mechanisms such as workers movements and trade unions are helping to create a more robust democracy.

**Resisting Foreign Occupation and Rising Authoritarianism**

With the collapse of the Baathist regime in April 2003 came a dramatic upsurge in trade unions and workers movements across Iraq. These included those which represented the interests of Iraqi doctors, nurses, taxi drivers, university staff, police, electricians, engineers, journalists, teachers, carpenters, customs officers and emergency service personnel. They have repeatedly used non-violent protests, strikes, sit-ins and walk-outs in order to draw attention to important issues such as their poor working conditions, the interference they are subjected to from various forces, the pressures under which they work, unfair dismissals,
ineffectual government regulation and the dangerous nature of their jobs. On paper such union movements are illegal because, despite the fact that the US-led coalition went to great lengths to overturn many Saddam-era laws, they did not tamper with the 1987 ‘Decree 150’ that stripped workers of their basic rights: it abolished the minimum wage, and quashed any effort to bargain collectively, to organise and to strike ("The Solidarity Centre," 2007). Under the Baath, the only official union had been the state sanctioned General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) which was little more than a rubber stamp for government policy.

Despite being officially illegal, the thousands of Iraqis who worked for the nation’s Southern Oil Company (SOC) formed one of the earliest and strongest union movements to emerge in post-Saddam Iraq. Under the leadership of President Hassan Jumaa Awwad Al-Asady they formed the Southern Oil Company Union (SOCU) immediately after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003 ("Oil Workers’ Union," 2005). It is important to note two substantive facts about the SOCU. Firstly, the SOCU (and its later iterations such as IFOU, see below) largely represents the interests of Iraq’s Shia-dominated southern regions which are also home to the vast majority of Iraq’s oil reserves. As an example, the three provinces of Nasiriya, Maysan and Basra alone hold around 71 percent of Iraq’s oil – literally billions worth of natural resources (Munsoon, 2009: 185). Secondly, it is important to note that because of SOCU’s sheer size it has managed to retain its political independence from the many major political parties or movements that have jostled for power since the fall of the former regime. Beyond this, it is also worth noting that SOCU was very clear about its two central platforms from its inception: it was adamantly opposed to the US occupation; and it sought to protect Iraq’s oil sector from privatization and international plundering. On the former, Al-Asady has stated bluntly that “It is a deep and patriotic feeling of all the union’s members that the occupation forces must leave the country immediately, whatever the consequences” (Al-Asady cited in "Oil Workers’ Union," 2005). While on the latter, Al-Asady has commented that:

We will stand firm against this imperialist plan that would hand over Iraq’s wealth to international capitalism such that the deprived Iraqi people would not benefit from
it...we are taking this path for the sake of Iraq’s glory even if it costs us our lives.
Iraqis are capable of managing their companies and their investments by themselves.
(Al-Asady cited in "Oil Workers’ Union," 2005)

In May 2003, SOCU faced its first challenge in the form of the private US construction and military contracting company, Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR), then a subsidiary of Halliburton. KBR were put in charge of organising and securing Iraq’s oil sector by the US occupation and therefore attempted to take it over with military support from the US. The SOCU immediately resisted and were highly suspicious of KBR, seeing them as part of the occupational apparatus and therefore sought unsuccessfully to bar them from all oil sector sites. By June of 2003 the interference of KBR and the humiliation felt be SOCU members in working for a foreign occupational enterprise reached boiling point. Compounding this was the fact that many SOCU members had not been paid since March. This led to a strike of around 100 oil workers at the Basra oil refinery in Sheiba. They blockaded the road at the front of the refinery and a five hour standoff ensued between them and British troops. The move was immediately effective and SOCU successfully negotiated with the occupational authorities for due wages to be awarded within a day. Despite this early success, wage delays continued and in August SOCU took the drastic action of bringing a halt to oil exports for two days. In response, the occupational authorities drafted ‘Order 30’, a wage table which was supposed to ensure that the workers were paid fairly and in a timely manner. However, not only did delays continue, the SOCU also claimed that the wage table did not provide a fair income and did not allow for escalations in rent, food, and fuel. In response, they drafted their own wage table and negotiated with the Ministry of Oil, threatening a general strike if their demands were not met ("Oil Workers’ Union," 2005). By January of 2004, SOCU had claimed its first major victory – the US occupational authorities agreed to pay the demanded wages ("Leave our country," 2005).

The news of SOCU’s victory spread through Iraq’s oil industry and, when the Minister for Oil visited the Basra Pipeline Company in February 2004, they not only demanded to be represented by SOCU President Al-Asady, they also demanded the same wages as their
comrades in the SOCU. To make their point clear, the Basra oil workers went on strike, shutting down oil export for at least four hours. The actions of the Basra Pipeline Company were indicative of a broader trend in the Iraqi oil sector: the SOCU was increasingly seen as the industry leader and capable of representing all their interests in the face of the occupation. SOCU was therefore joined by around ten smaller unions across the oil and gas sector and changed its name to the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) in June 2004. With some 23,000 members, the GUOE was an increasingly powerful union and few decision regarding Iraq’s oil sector could be made in Baghdad without at least considering how it would respond (“Oil Workers’ Union,” 2005).

The GUOE began to really flex its political muscles in May 2005 when it hosted a large international conference against the privatisation of Iraq’s oil industry. Aiming directly at the complicity of certain Iraqi politicians in US plans to privatise Iraqi oil, the conference called upon “members of Parliament...to take a firm stand against political currents and directives calling for the privatisation of the public sector in Iraq” (“Iraqi oil workers,” 2005). By June of 2005, around 15,000 workers at the GUOE conducted a peaceful 24 hour strike, cutting most oil exports from the south of Iraq. This particular strike was conducted in support of demands made by Basra Governor Mohammad Al-Waili that a higher percentage of Basra’s oil revenue be invested back into the regions infrastructure including addressing issues such as sewerage, electricity, medical needs, poverty, malnutrition and unemployment. At the time, around 20% of Iraq’s oil revenue was being directly pumped into the coffers of the Ministry of Defence as Iraqi infrastructure crumbled. Al-Waili is quoted as saying that “Faced with a pathetic and unjust situation, our moral responsibility leads us to demand in the name of our people a fair share of resources” (Al-Waili as cited in: “Iraqi oil exports,” 2005).

In response to such mass action, in August 2005 the Iraqi government passed ‘Decree 8750’ which was specifically designed to limit trade union activities by prohibiting them from holding funds, collecting dues and maintaining assets, including any union established since the fall of the former regime (“Worker Violations in Iraq,” 2007). The only union exempt from such tight constraints was the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) which was
hastily created in September 2005 from the merger of the Baathist-era GFTU and a couple of other pro-government unions. However, the crackdown on all unions except those sanctioned by the state is itself reminiscent of the Baathist regime – it severely limited freedom of association and the rights of the Iraqi citizen to peacefully organise, assemble and strike ("Annual Survey Iraq," 2010). However, this did not seem to bother Al-Asady who continued his work among the oil workers of the south and arranged for the GUOE to change its name to the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) which, because of its continued popularity in the industry, now had over 26,000 members.

Following the December 2005 elections in Iraq, a six-month political stalemate ensued with little known Nuri Al-Maliki of the Shia Islamist Daʿwa party eventually nominated as Prime Minister, his government finally taking office in May 2006 (Stansfield, 2007: 187-9). Over the next couple of years (2006-7) Iraq descended into a particularly dark and unprecedented period with grim and complex battles fought between the occupying forces, the Iraqi armed services, various insurgent groups and terrorist organisations, as well as between competing ethno-religious sectarian militias (Dawisha, 2009: 258-71). Deliberately targeted for their ideology and actions, Iraq’s various unions came under attack: members were kidnapped, detained, tortured and killed by a host of different factions, their offices were repeatedly bombed or looted and their activities were severely limited (for a grim list, see "Violence Against Unionists," 2007; "Worker Violations in Iraq," 2007). Nonetheless on the 22 August 2006 some 700 IFOU members went on strike to demand the payment of delayed wages and to call for over-time payments, pay increases and better working conditions. The strike cut off some oil transport from the south to Baghdad having the immediate effect of generating promises from the Ministry of Oil to address all outstanding issues. However, when authorities continued to fail to live up to the promises by 4 September, the IFOU resumed their strike ("Worker Violations in Iraq," 2007).

Without any consultation with IFOU or Iraq’s oil sector, in late 2006 the Iraqi government endorsed the Iraqi Oil Law (also known as the Iraqi Hydrocarbon Law). This law had originally been designed by the US consulting firm, BearingPoint under commission from the US
Administration in 2004. The IFOU leadership vehemently opposed the law because it would see up to two-thirds of Iraq’s natural resources signed over to international companies on 20 year contracts ("IFOU," 2010b; "Iraqi Unions Condemn," 2006). The issue here was a particular clause of the draft law which would allow for production-sharing agreements with foreign oil companies. IFOU saw such a law as a throwback to colonial exploitation of Iraqi oil and as a blatant attempt by the US to commandeer Iraq’s oil wealth for their own profit ("Iraqi workers strike," 2011). However, when the Iraqi government continued to ignore the objections of IFOU to the draft law, the union sent a public letter to the Iraqi Oil Ministry on 27 April and then again on 5 May 2007 in which they outlined a list of 17 demands. These included improvements to wages, health benefits and other working conditions, as well as consultation on the proposed Iraqi Oil Law ("IFOU Strike Demands," 2007). They also called for the sacking of the general manager of the SOC and for the financial and administrative independence of the company from the Baghdad-based central ministry ("IRAQ: Oil workers," 2007).

IFOU gave the ministry until the 10 May to respond before they would go on strike – effectively stopping production in major southern oil-rich provinces. At the time, this would have brought to a standstill an estimated 93% of the federal government’s budget. Not surprisingly, Maliki panicked and the strikes were delayed when he and delegates from the Ministry of Oil organised a meeting with members of the IFOU, including Al-Asady. This resulted in the formation of a committee tasked with working on finding solutions acceptable to both sides. However, when the government failed to deliver on any of its promises by June, some 600 IFOU members went on strike across southern Iraq, bringing an immediate halt to the free flow of oil products, kerosene and gas to much of the country (Cogan, 2007; "Iraq government orders," 2007). A few days later, Maliki responded by stating that he would “strike with an iron fist anyone that would tamper with the public order or carry out evil schemes undermining the state’s higher interests”, labelling the IFOU leaders “outlaws and saboteurs” (Maliki cited in Cogan, 2007). The Iraqi military surrounded the oil workers and arrest warrants were issued for several IFOU leaders including Al-Asady in an attempt to clamp down on industrial action. At the time, Sami Ramadani who runs
IFOU’s support committee in the UK pointed out that “Issuing a warrant for the arrest of the oil workers’ leaders is an outrageous attack on trade union and democratic freedom” (Ramadani as cited in: "Iraq government orders," 2007). Nonetheless, the union held firm and, after several days of meetings and much political deliberation, Al-Asady released a statement which claimed:

Finally the workers have won in demanding their legitimate rights... And after deliberations...the two sides agreed to halt the strike and to use dialogue in dealings to resolve the outstanding issues... Therefore we would like to say to all that the workers will is indestructible. The workers can achieve what they want by the means available to them and their strength. And the oil workers are very strong, because they have a legitimate right... Long live the Iraqi working class. (Al-Asady, 2007)

However, the fight was far from over. In the following month (July 2007) IFOU conducted further rallies in Basra in protest of the draft Iraqi Oil Law. Even the state sanctioned GFIW indicated their strong opposition to the law. They demanded that the government consult with and include members of the union in the discussions and explained that they adamantly reject the privatization of Iraq’s national oil wealth ("Statement Issued by GFIW," 2007). Indicating his disdain for any critical union movement, the Iraqi Oil Minister, Hussain Al-Shahrani, issued a statement in which he ordered the Ministry of Oil to immediately halt any “cooperation with any member of any union in any of the committees organized under the name of the union as these unions do not enjoy any legal status to work inside the government sector” (Shahrani cited in "U.S. Unions Rally," 2007).

By May 2008, while the Iraqi Oil Law had not been officially ratified, the Iraqi government had begun courting several large international oil companies such as Chevron and ExxonMobil in the hope of securing lucrative contracts. In perhaps his most provocative move to date, Al-Asady responded by issuing a statement to the annual shareholder meetings of both Chevron and ExxonMobil. It is worth citing at length:
We call upon the governments, corporations and other institutions behind the ongoing occupation of Iraq to respond to our demands for real democracy, true sovereignty and self-determination, free of all foreign interference. Five years of invasion, war and occupation have brought nothing but death, destruction, misery and suffering to our people... Our union offices have been raided. Union property has been seized and destroyed. Our bank accounts have been frozen. Our leaders have been beaten, arrested, abducted and assassinated. Our rights as workers are routinely violated. This is an attack on our rights and the basic precepts of a democratic society... We call upon you...to end the nightmare of occupation and restore our sovereignty and national independence so that we can chart our own course to the future. (Al-Asady, 2008)

The statement then goes on to list 4 key demands including: the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops; the passage of a labour law to protect the rights of the workers; an end to meddling in Iraq’s economic affairs by foreign powers and multinational corporations; and that the “US government, oil companies and others immediately cease lobbying for the oil law which would fracture the country and hand control over our oil to multinational companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron” (Al-Asady, 2008). Despite such vehement opposition and the lack of an appropriate legal framework, British and American oil companies such as Shell, British Petroleum (BP), and Total, as well as both Chevron and ExxonMobil were awarded a series of lucrative oil contracts on 30 June 2008, fuelling the notion that the war was all about Western profiteering from Iraqi oil.

In the next round of oil contracts awarded by the Iraqi government a year later (June 2009), BP and China National Petroleum Company bid for sites such as the Rumailah oil field in Basra, the country’s largest producing oilfield ("IFOU Threatens Escalation," 2009). IFOU threatened to escalate their opposition and a senior member of the union, Falih Abboud Imara, commented at the time: “If the Ministry of Oil insists on executing the agreements with the foreign companies, we will work on making the deals fail” (Imara cited in "Acute tension," 2009). To do so, IFOU would once again shift from peaceful demonstrations to
complete strikes across all of Iraq’s southern oil refineries controlled by the IFOU, totally halting production. Given this environment, it is hardly surprising that the Iraqi Ministry of Oil stepped up its crackdown on the rights and freedoms of Iraq’s oil unions. Shahristani employed several key tactics: he continued to maintain the union activity was in fact illegal because the 1987 Baathist law prohibiting unions had not been overturned; he threatened to sue the IFOU leadership for provocations against the government and foreign companies if they continued to create obstacles to reaching agreements with international oil firms; and he ordered the forced relocation of many IFOU members and activists throughout 2008-10, including union leaders like Vice President Ibrahim Radhi (Norton-Taylor, 2008; "Solidarity Center Decries," 2010). The latter was particularly onerous not only because it is a major breach of civil rights and a blatant attempt at union-busting, but also because it was very dangerous with union members usually transferred to unsafe areas or those with different ethno-religious or tribal affiliations ("Annual Survey Iraq," 2010).

At the March 2010 elections no one Iraqi political block managed to secure the 163 seats needed to form a government in the 325 member Parliament. This saw the nation plummet into nine long months of political stalemate with much of Iraq’s political elite failing to encourage the mutually beneficial dialogue and debate critical to democracy. Foremost among these was Maliki himself who was determined to cling to power and underwent an aggressive and multifaceted campaign towards such an end (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2010b). In the middle of 2010, as the government deadlock continued and Iraqis sweltered in the heat of summer with only sporadic electricity to fuel their air conditioners and poor access to drinking water, frustrations literally reached boiling point (Isakhan, 2012b). Several protests and sit-ins erupted across Iraq, the largest and longest of which were held in the south at Nasiriyah and Basra. In reaction to the protests, the Iraqi government underwent a two-pronged attack to quell civil unrest. The first prong was a severe set of regulations which limited the ability of Iraqis to organize peaceful protests. The new regulations also permitted the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to use “all known methods to disperse protestors”, including unlimited force, which led to intimidation and arrest of protest organizers as well as injuries and deaths ("Secret Order," 2010). Under these new oppressive measures, it was not long
before the Iraqi government brought charges against IFOU and issued arrest warrants for Awad and other senior members such as General Secretary, Faleh Abood Umara, because they urged strikes and had spoken to both the Iraqi and international media about the poor conditions suffered by Iraq’s oil workers (“IFOU,” 2010a; "Union leaders taken," 2010).

The second prong was to replace the troubled and unpopular Minister for Electricity, Karim Waheed. Upon first glance this appeared to be a gesture by Maliki to appease the protestor’s calls for Waheed’s resignation. However, Maliki replaced Waheed with Shahristani who now headed both the Ministry of Oil and the Ministry of Electricity. It was not long before Shahristani employed his well-crafted and draconian approach to trade unions to the electricity sector. He ordered police raids on the headquarters of the Basra-based Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union (IEUWU) and he then outlawed the electricity unions and had many of them forcibly shutdown, citing the Saddam-era anti-union laws (“Annual Survey Iraq," 2010; "Iraqi Minister Closes," 2010). At the time, Shahristani was quoted as saying

> It is not a new thing and when I went to [the] electricity ministry I activated this law as I am very keen to implement the law... Any employee who gets a salary to do a specific work, is not allowed to do any other activities under any name, whether it is a union or humanitarian or a national activities or whatever activity. (Shahristani cited in Lando, 2010)

Iraq’s 2010 political deadlock continued until early November when an agreement was signed which would pave the way for the formation of a government. Finally, a government was announced in December of 2010 and – to the grave disappointment of many Iraqis – much remained the same: Maliki would retain the position of Prime Minister and many other key positions would rotate between a handful of familiar faces (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2010a). One substantial change was the appointment of Shahristani as Deputy Prime Minister for Energy. It seems Shahristani’s heavy handed approach to cracking down on unions, protests and civil society had impressed Maliki and he was duly rewarded. At the time of his appointment, Shahristani boasted of the 15 oil and gas contracts that had been
signed with major international energy companies, despite the fact that Iraq had not officially ratified its Oil Law and the move had been strongly resisted by the sector, especially IFOU ("Iraq to lead," 2010).

As Shahristani took up his new post in Baghdad, the very first protests were beginning to occur across Tunisia. As long lasting and deeply entrenched regimes fell across the region and as citizens embraced a new era of dissent and democratization, Iraqis were confronted with the failures of their own democracy to deliver on the many promises made to them since 2003 (Isakhan, Mansouri, & Akbarzadeh, 2012). This led to weeks of scattered protests across Iraq, culminating in the ‘Day of Rage’ (25 February 2011) in which thousands of protestors took to the streets in at least 17 separate demonstrations across the country following Friday prayers. In Baghdad’s own Tahir square thousands of Iraqi protestors gathered to voice their concerns and air their frustrations, with many calling for an end to Maliki’s leadership ("Deadly protests," 2011; "Fresh protests," 2011).

Predictably, Maliki reacted to such events in ways similar to dictators and autocrats across the region: he ordered a brutal crackdown on the Iraqi protestors, journalists and civil society or political actors who had been involved in the events. The ISF and the protestors clashed frequently, leading to many arrests, beatings and deaths. This also included a crackdown on the nation’s oil sector. In February, the Ministry of Oil issued official penalties of around USD$50,000 each to several refinery employees for having delayed production for less than 24 hours in order to protest conditions and pay ("Minister of Oil," 2011). Such figures are exorbitant by international standards and impossible to pay for average Iraqis – the daily wage for skilled labor is around $10 per day, unskilled labor as low as $4.50. Similar fines were also issued to organizers of a combined IFOU and GFIW protest of more than 300 oil sector employees outside the headquarters of the SOC in May. They rallied against the deep-seated corruption among management and demanded their pay-rate match that of employees of foreign oil companies. One oil worker, Assad Abu Hussein said

If the Southern Oil Company does not give us our rights of profits and bonuses, we will stop production. Just because we are poor and our field was not developed by a
foreign company like the rest of the oil fields, we are being treated unfairly.

(Bedford, 2011)

In response, the Iraqi government issued ‘Decree 95’ and ‘Decree 97’, which officially withdrew their recognition of the once state-backed GFIW, immediately appointing their replacement in the new “Ministerial Preparatory Committee” (MPC). In one swift maneuver the Iraqi government had rid themselves of any official and troublesome union movement in favor of an un-elected and politically partisan MPC who took over the supervision of Iraq’s official trade sector, including the forthcoming union elections (“Iraqi Government Moves,” 2011). It almost goes without saying that such moves are not only profoundly anti-democratic, they also speak to a complex Iraqi political landscape in which the ruling elite are becoming increasingly authoritarian and oppressive.

**Conclusion**

This is a critical time for Iraqi trade unions and workers movements such as the IFOU. They continue to endure poor conditions, low pay, little safety, and virtually no rights. In the decade that has elapsed since the invasion, neither the US occupation nor the Iraqi government have made any substantive effort to overturn the oppressive Baathist laws which restrict the rights of unions to advocate on behalf of the workers. Similarly, the lack of an appropriate legal framework governing foreign oil investment has left billions of dollars of Iraq’s oil wealth exposed to foreign exploitation and rampant corruption. In addition, unions like IFOU have been actively suppressed by military force and the strong-arm tactics of an increasingly oppressive state which has mastered the manipulation of democracy for authoritarian ends. Despite all of this, there are several very interesting points to be made about the rise of trade unions and workers movements since 2003. Firstly, these indigenous, localized and highly co-ordinated movements reveal the strength of the Iraqi people’s will towards democracy and that they are more than capable of utilising democratic mechanisms in the face of foreign interference or authoritarian forms of power. Secondly, while the participation and engagement of the Iraqi citizenship with democratic mechanisms such as unions does not qualify Iraq as a democracy, it is a positive milestone towards such an end.
Specifically, a strong union movement is not only crucial in re-establishing an engaged public life, but it can also help to abate the many conflicts across Iraq and thereby aid the shift towards a free, egalitarian and democratic nation. Finally, IFOU and other unions are critical in holding the Iraqi government to account; they are an informal network of power that has proven themselves capable of advocating for democratic change in the face of various forms of tyranny and oppression. Whichever way Iraq turns from here, Iraqi trade unions and workers movements such as IFOU will be critical to the nation’s stability and its ability to develop a robust and stable democracy.

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