Chapter 4

Discourses of Democracy in Colonial Iraq

> Personnel sent from across the British Empire to build the new [Iraqi] state
> interacted with the remnants of the Ottoman Empire on the basis of popular
> imaginative constructions influential in British and wider European society …
> This European vision of the world the British staff confronted was sustained
> by two central tenets. First, the Ottoman Empire in Iraq was conceived as an
> Oriental Despotism. Under this rubric it was unchanging and unable to escape
> the constraints of its inherent superstitions, violence and corruption. Secondly,
> Iraq was perceived as fundamentally divided … The Iraqi state constructed by
> the British was to be an occidental one, operating in a balanced and
> harmonious way with the Iraqi people. It was to be defined in absolute
> ideological contrast to the Ottoman state, seen as despotic, inefficient and
> tyrannical. (Dodge 2005 [2003]: 43–4)

Beyond Colonial Discourse

It was the impact of the First World War (1914–18) and the subsequent Arab Revolt which brought about the ultimate demise of the Ottoman Empire and their rule over the Arab lands. These events ushered in the emergence of the modern nation-states of the Middle East under the auspices of European powers such as Britain and France who moved into much of what is now Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel, carving up the region into two zones of influence under the clandestine Sykes-Picot agreement (Preston 2003: 164–72). Craving the rich oil reserves of the Gulf region to fuel its expanding military machine, the British occupied Basra from the start of the war and the rest of Iraq by the end of 1918 (Kent 1976, Majd 2006, Stivers 1982). This era of Iraqi history, referred to here as Colonial Iraq (1921–58),[1] saw the British play both an overt and covert role in Iraqi politics until the Revolution of 1958.

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[1] In some accounts, the Colonial era in Iraq is understood to have concluded with the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty in 1930 and the formal end of Britain's mandate over Iraq in 1932. However, the latter date of 1958 has been used here because, until the Revolution of that year, Britain maintained a strong presence in and influence over Iraq. This included a military presence as well as a collection of 'advisors' who functioned behind the scenes, often demanding

On the whole, the British occupation revealed a condescending, ill-informed and inexperienced administration that was widely unpopular in Iraq. The British invaded Iraq 'not only with army and armour' as Muhsin Al-Musawi puts it, but with 'an Orientalist legacy that spoke for and of the colonized' (Al-Musawi 2006: 58). In Iraq, this 'Orientalist legacy' had the effect of dividing up the Mesopotamian region

> between cities supposedly 'corrupted' by the 'despotism' of the Ottoman Empire and a countryside which was believed to be the preserve of the 'true Iraqi' who was, nonetheless, backward, even prelapsarian, and irrational. This simple-minded and offensive dualism ensured that indigenous voices would not be listened to and indigenous agency denied. (Gregory 2004: 148)

The evidence of such simple-mindedness is found in even the most cursory analysis of Colonial-era literature written about Iraq. It reveals a catalogue of tropes underpinned by conceptions of Iraq and its people as incapable of democracy. In the correspondence he kept with the British Foreign Office, Sir Arnold Wilson, the Colonial Administrator of Iraq from 1918–20, argued that to 'install a real Arab Government in Mesopotamia is impossible, and, if we attempt it, we shall abandon the Middle East to anarchy' (Wilson 1919). Similarly, David Samuel Margoliouth, who was not only part of the British Administration in Iraq from 1919 but also a renowned and authoritative British scholar of the Middle East, attempted to connect Iraq's ancient past with its subjugation under British control, arguing that 'Iraq is used to foreign rule since ancient times, for it was ruled by the Mongols, the Turks and the Iranians, as it cannot rule itself. Thus, the Iraqis should choose the British to rule them, or to be under their mandatory rule and protection' (Margoliouth 1919).

Another example can be found in the writing of British explorer Freya Stark who spent much of the late 1920s and 1930s travelling the Middle East and compiling important records

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that the monarchs kowtowed to British interests. Britain also maintained veto powers over various military and bureaucratic mechanisms of the state and tightly controlled the country's foreign relations. As Peter Sluglett has so succinctly put it 'British influence was not removed [in 1932], simply employed more covertly and less directly … from behind the scenes' (Sluglett 2007: 210).

for those back home. In one of her many letters, this one to Sir Henry Lawrence and dated 6 March 1930, Stark offers her opinions on Iraqi democracy by arguing that, 'The whole show here is run by a few rather disgusting local politicians: they don't represent anything except themselves' (Stark 1951: 127). 'Everyone agrees', she continues, 'that Iraq is not fit to govern itself … I think the Iraqis themselves agree in this: the difference is that they don't care so frightfully much about being well governed' (Stark 1951: 128). In a classically Orientalist way, Stark moves forward from here to separate out British interests from Iraqi politics, stating that

> I don't know why one should bother so much about how Iraq is governed. The matter of importance to us is to safeguard our own affairs. It is only because we assume that the two are bound together that we give so much weight to the local politics. It seems to me that the one only vital problem is to find out how things we are interested in can be made safe independently of native politics. If this was solved, all the rest would follow – including as much Arab freedom as their geography allows: for I imagine no one would wish to stay here for the mere pleasure of doing good to people who don't want it. (Stark 1951: 129)

This kind of discourse also extended to the media debates that were going on in the United Kingdom during the Colonial period (J. Bernstein 2008). In a letter to the editor published in the *London Times* on 21 June 1920 the author argues:

> Eastern peoples as a rule detest efficiency and sanitation, and although the Arab welcomed us when we were beating the Turk … I doubt if he wishes to be civilized in a hurry, and certainly he resents excessive control and taxation … therefore the new system [of democracy] is not likely to be acceptable to the Arab community … [and may require] an army of occupation for many years until the people have become civilized and accepted our form of administration. (*London Times*, 1920)

However, this kind of Orientalist vision of Iraqi politics is not confined to the annals of Colonial history, it is also evident in more recent scholarship which has sought to examine the Colonial era in Iraq. Elie Kedourie completely ignores the positive developments of the era,

instead focusing on the region's tendency towards violence, barbarism and despotism. In one instance, Kedourie concludes that the politics of the Colonial period of Iraqi history are constituted by 'a wretched political architecture and constitutional jerry-building of the flimsiest and most dangerous kind' (Kedourie 1970: 239). This is reinforced in his later *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, which details several democratic experiments that were conducted under the auspices of the British and French across the Middle East throughout the first half of the twentieth century (namely Iraq 1921–38, Egypt 1923–52, Lebanon 1926–75 and Syria 1928–49). According to Kedourie the main reason these attempts at introducing constitutional rule to the Middle East failed is the fact that the people of the region have historically been accustomed to 'autocracy and passive obedience' (Kedourie 1994: 103).

Despite this overwhelmingly negative picture of Iraqi politics throughout the Colonial epoch, some recent studies have attempted to challenge the received wisdom by asserting counter-histories and counter-narratives. For several notable scholars, it was not that the British had confronted despotism in Iraq, but that they had introduced it. The failures of the British in terms of their extensive nation building project and their modest attempt to bring Westminster-style democracy to Iraq sowed the seeds of the authoritarian and tyrannical regimes that were to flower in later decades (Dodge 2005 [2003]: 43–61). For Hana Batatu, the British and the French were the first to have both the technological capability and experience to obliterate the existing social order and create in its place the economic and cultural conditions necessary for authoritarianism to emerge (Batatu 1982 [1978]). Along these same lines, Gareth Stansfield has recently stated that 'The rise of authoritarianism in Iraq can be traced to the tensions caused by the legacies of British Colonial involvement in the formation of civilian governments that were more often than not perceived to be corrupt and inefficient' (Stansfield 2007: 81).

Despite the abject failures of the British and the authoritarianism which emerged as a result of their occupation, other scholars have been keen to point out that the Colonial period nonetheless saw a complex political landscape in Iraq which promoted varied debate and discourse as well as calls for genuine democratic reform (Al-Musawi 2006, Bashkin 2009,

Davis 2005b, Dawisha 2009). Despite the many differences among such a diverse range of civil and political movements, what they (mostly) held in common was the call for an end to foreign occupation and the formation of an independent and democratic Iraq. As Orit Bashkin has explained, many Iraqis of this time

> did theorize about the nature of their political regime, and some strove to maintain a democratic system. Moreover, the writing about democracy was symptomatic of a larger phenomenon within Hashemite Iraq: the creation of a pluralistic public sphere … Exploring aspects of heterogeneity in Iraqi society demonstrates how the fluid nature of groupings in Iraq created a space in which the views of numerous groups coexisted and enriched each other. (Bashkin 2009: 17)

An examination of the complexities of Colonial Iraq reveals myriad political parties, media outlets [2] and protest movements and their complex role in promoting and upholding sophisticated and diverse discourses of democracy. This chapter documents the debates that circulated in the Iraqi press at the time of the British occupation and Hashemite monarchy and details their role in fostering vitriolic critique of the incumbent regime, in mobilizing the public to protest and in serving as the people's watchdog over the elite. It is precisely the egalitarian and democratic tendencies found throughout the media/political nexus of Colonial Iraq that provide for us a new vision of Iraqi history that is directly at odds with traditional views of Iraqi and Middle Eastern political culture. This chapter also exposes the contradiction between Britain's rhetoric as a harbinger of democracy and its contemporaneous attempts to quell Iraq's free press and to curtail democratic reform.

A Fledgling Public Sphere

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[2] It should be noted here that earlier work by the author has included a set of detailed tables that document the most significant media outlets of Colonial, Post-Colonial, and Re-Colonial Iraq (Isakhan 2009a: 247–75). While such media outlets and their respective political parties are discussed in great length throughout chapters 4, 5 and 6, much of the initial detail compiled in these tables has been necessarily excluded.

After the First World War, the British were at first welcomed by most of Iraq's numerous clergymen, intellectuals and poets who took at face value the promise to deliver the 'complete and definitive liberation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks' and 'the establishment of national Governments and Administrations drawing their authority from the initiative and free choice of indigenous populations' ('The Anglo-French Declaration' 1918: 21). This honeymoon period was short-lived, however, as it became increasingly evident that such promises would go unfulfilled and that 'the British neither intended to cede control of Iraq to an indigenous government nor planned to support Arab nationalist demands' (Davis 2005b: 44). Reasoning that the Iraqis were incapable of governing themselves, the British went to great lengths to abolish the Ottoman governing institutions, which included the elected provincial councils, and installed their own political officers in a system of direct Colonial rule (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 38). Unsurprisingly, such moves were widely resisted by the people and remained highly contentious across Iraq.

Perhaps the first example of such resistance came from a subsidiary of the earlier Istanbul-based political party *Al-Ahd*, known as *Al-Ahd Al-Iraqi* ('The Iraqi Covenant'), which effectively stood as the first political group to call for Iraqi independence from the British at the very earliest days of its hegemony in 1918 (Stansfield 2007: 41). It was this group that was to provide several of the key figures of twentieth century Iraqi politics, some staunch opponents to the British and their installed monarchy, and others who went on to wield significant power within the state apparatus (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 36). Early calls for Iraqi independence, such as those issued by *Al-Ahd Al-Iraqi*, grew substantially when the British were awarded a mandate over Iraq in 1920 by the League of Nations. This development, which pre-empted the establishment of ongoing British rule over Iraq, produced the political climate in which the Great Iraqi Revolution took place in 1920 (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 39–44). Having been preceded by a brief Kurdish rebellion in 1919, the following year saw the tribesman, religious leaders and secular nationalists of the central Euphrates region band together in an armed nationalist-inspired insurgency against the British occupation. The presence of a common enemy meant

that the Shiites and the Sunnis came together, holding joint religio-political meetings which culminated 'in patriotic oratory and poetic thundering against the English' (Batatu 1982 [1978]: 23). The role of poets, intellectuals and religious figures from across the many ethnic and spiritual divides in Iraq was central to mobilizing the people to action (Al-Musawi 2006: 49–51, 95–9).

This collective action promulgated a new sense of solidarity inside Iraq and prompted strong calls for a democratic state. Although the uprising was ultimately defeated by the British, the Iraqis were able to secure a number of the religiously significant southern cities for short periods of time. The political vacuum created by the withdrawal of Ottoman authority and then the temporary defeat of the British, resulted in the establishment of several civil and administrative organizations that functioned like local councils, particularly across the south. As they had done during the time of the Mamluks, the Shia clergy of Najaf made several democratic advances. Most notably, they agreed on the creation of a complex legislative and executive council, the members of which were determined by votes placed in ballot boxes at the entrance to the many open markets that scattered the city. As Dawisha notes, 'this election was a remarkable feat as the impulse emerged spontaneously from the people themselves' indicating the ability of the Iraqi people to practise the very fundamentals of democracy, autonomous of Western tutelage, was strong (Dawisha 2009: 49).

Although these enclaves of autonomous democratic governance were relatively short-lived and were quashed by the British, they are not the only indicators of a fledgling civil society in Iraq at this time. This same period also witnessed a dramatic upsurge in budding journalists with strong ties to various, particularly nationalist, political parties (Davis 2005c: 56). These wordsmiths were generally keen to re-ignite the days of the Young Turks and produced a number of both relatively objective and highly partisan papers which not only covered contemporary events and developments but also played a role in inciting people to resist the British occupation. Many of these papers – some of which were the unapologetic mouthpiece for a particular political faction, while others claimed to be independent – asserted

that democracy was the most suitable form of government for Iraq's future. Independent newspapers such as *Al-Istiqlal* ('Independence' of Najaf) and *Al-Furat* ('The Euphrates') published a series of editorials that were not only scathing in their criticism of the British occupation, they articulated the discourses of democracy circulating throughout Iraq at the time. *Al-Istiqlal* appeared for the express purpose of responding to 'the occupiers' deception, to disquiet them, to reveal their barbaric misdeeds' (*Al-Istiqlal* cited in Ayalon 1995: 92). Similarly, *Al-Furat* played a critical role in advocating grass-roots political movements in Iraq, arguing that the Iraqi Revolution of 1920 was 'similar to the Irish and Egyptian Revolutions in every detail … provoked by protest, inflamed by despotism and spread by the loss of liberty' (*Al-Furat* 1920a). The paper also carried stern warnings for the British, asking them to 'Take it easy' because 'The nation which you were against, and where you unleashed the sword, causing so much bloodshed and casualties among its people, in utter hatred and arbitrary rule, regardless of its rights and justice, this nation is to take you to task in the court of history' (*Al-Furat* 1920c).

Building on this rhetoric, another article from the same paper seeks to explain the growing resistance movement in Iraq as a product of the occupation and its control over political dissent. The author writes,

> The nation got impatient as a result of the oppression practised by the occupation authority, especially in these days when Iraq's complaints are everywhere in line with the principle of 'self-determination and total independence'. The Iraqis realize that legal requests and peaceful demonstrations are useless, as they restore no right. It is especially so because just complaints reach no political circle abroad, as the British are in total control of all media and means of communication. (*Al-Furat* 1920b)[3]

Without too much concern for the opinions and attitudes expressed in these papers, Winston Churchill set about hastily designing the nation-states of the modern Middle East at the Cairo

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[3] The translations of *Al-Furat* cited here are taken from Mushin Al-Musawi's chapter and later book on the politics of Iraqi literature and journalism (Al-Musawi 1991: 206–7; 2006: 97–8).

Conference of 1921, attended by regional experts such as T. E. Lawrence, Sir Percy Cox and Gertrude Bell. It was their advice which saw the British unite the three previously autonomous regions, or *vilayets*, of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul and install Faisal I to the position of the first modern king of Iraq (Catherwood 2004: 127–60). Faisal was the son of Sharif Hussayn of Mecca who had declared himself the Caliph of all Muslims and had orchestrated the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Initially, Faisal was installed as the king of Syria in 1920 but when the French exiled him, the British gave him a second chance, this time as the ruler of the fledgling Iraq. It was this sequence of events which saw a man who had never before set foot in the lands of Iraq, ascend the throne in a ceremony unbeknown to the vast majority of his subjects while the military band played the eerily symbolic 'God Save the Queen'.

Having appointed Faisal, the British staged the first of modern Iraq's artificial experiments with democracy: a national referendum which garnered an impossible 96% endorsement of his rule (Anderson and Stansfield 2004: 14–5). The local authorities of the various provinces were infuriated and the clerics who had so adamantly called on Faisal to implement a parliament and a national constitution, now delivered *fatwas* ('Religious edicts') banning their loyal followers from participating in the elections for the Constituent Assembly until such time as the monarch yielded to the people's call for democratization, civil liberties and freedom of the press (Dawisha 2005a: 13). One *fatwa* stated bluntly: 'Participation in the elections or anything resembling them which will injure the future prosperity of Iraq is pronounced *haram* by the unanimous verdict of Islam' ('Propaganda and Activities Against Participation in Iraq Elections' 1922).

Sensitive to such calls, Faisal did go on to establish a number of quasi-democratic reforms including nation-building exercises such as the development of a highly patriotic national school curriculum, a new Constitution, an Electoral Law and a Parliament consisting of both a *Majlis Al-Nuwab* ('Chamber of Deputies') and a *Majlis Al-Ayan* ('Senate') in 1924 which lasted until the Revolution of 1958. While these developments certainly had the

semblance of genuine democratic reform, the king maintained a number of powers including the ability to veto the parliament and issue independent decrees while the British ruled 'largely behind the scenes through a system of political "advisors" appointed to the major departments of government to ensure that British interests were adequately represented within the system' (Anderson and Stansfield 2004: 14). These steps towards democratization were little more than a façade designed to entrench the hegemony of the Sunni ruling elite and the British. Neither party was particularly interested in truly representative democracy as it would cede power to the majority Shia population and undermine British interests. Faisal also had a tendency to nepotism, favouring those Sunni Iraqi-Ottomans who had supported him in Syria and a small number of loyal and well-educated Jews over members of the Shiite majority or the myriad of other ethno-religious groups which constituted the new Iraq (Zubaida 2002: 211–2).

This bred wide dissatisfaction with authority in Iraq and led to the emergence of several opposition parties. The first of these were The Iraqi National Party (*Al-Hizb Al-Watani Al-Iraqi*) and The Iraqi Renaissance Party (*Hizb Al-Nahda Al-Iraqiyya*), both of which formed in 1922, made up of a number of citizens who had been active in their resistance to British occupation. These opposition parties quickly set up their own daily newspapers – The Iraqi National Party published *Mufid* ('The one who gives benefit') and The Iraqi Renaissance Party produced *Al-Rafidayn* ('Mesopotamia') – both of which were instrumental in mobilizing more than ten thousand people to demonstrate in front of the King's palace on the first anniversary of his ascension to the throne, demanding a representational government and an end to British interference. Seeing the power these two opposition parties had amassed in such a short period, the British High Commissioner, Sir Percy Cox, seized the opportunity to outlaw both parties, close down their publications and expel their leadership from Iraq (Al-Musawi 2006: 50, Dawisha 2005a: 14, 21).

Despite these rulings, the mid to late 1920s saw the re-emergence of several political parties in Iraq, including those of both the government and of the opposition. The pro-government parties included The Progressive Party (*Hizb Al-Taqaddum*) which was created by

Prime Minister Abd Al-Muhsin Al-Sadun in 1925 and was supported by partisan newspapers such as *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* ('The Arabic World') and *Al-Liwa* ('The Standard') as well as its own paper, *Al-Taqaddum* ('The Priority'). In 1930 Nuri Al-Said established The Commitment Party (*Hizb Al-Ahd*) and its paper *Sada Al-Ahd* ('The New Echo'). Al-Said went on to become Iraq's Prime Minister several times and, until the 1958 Revolution, he was arguably the single most powerful person in Iraq outside the royal family (Zubaida 2002: 211).

In terms of opposition parties, both The Iraqi National Party and The Iraqi Renaissance Party re-appeared in the mid- to late-1920s, but their power base had been significantly diminished. Other opposition parties were more successful. In 1924 the nucleus of Iraqi Marxists (who were to later form the Iraqi Communist Party [ICP][4]) began to gather some political momentum with the publication of Iraq's most radical organ, *Al-Sahifa* ('The Page'). Although the paper was shut down after only four months and six editions, it had printed translations of Communist texts from Europe, it had critiqued *Shariah* law for being dated and irrelevant to the modern world and, most radical of all, it had passionately advocated women's rights and sought to free them from oppression in the form of the veil and polygamy (Salucci 2005: 9–10). The following year The People's Party (*Hizb Al-Shab*) was established and supported by its own eponymous newspaper while, half a decade later, The Nationalist Fraternity Party (*Hizb Al-Ikha Al-Watani*, [Ikha]) was formed, producing the highly esteemed *Al-Bilad* ('The Country') newspaper. Published by Christians in Baghdad, *Al-Bilad* changed its name several times throughout the 1930s to avoid censorship and, in the 1940s, regularly reported on civil unrest (Ayalon 1995: 93–4, Dawisha 2005a: 14–15). What these opposition groups and their newspapers had in common were their calls for 'immediate independence for Iraq, the evacuation of British troops, and the development of a democratic and participatory Iraqi state' (Davis 2005b: 49).

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[4] The ICP played a fundamental role in twentieth century Iraqi politics. For a scholarly account of this history, see Tareq Ismael's *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Ismael 2008).

Despite this unity – or perhaps because of it – the British continued to interfere in Iraq's domestic politics and were particularly hostile to any democratic practices or movements, especially if they challenged British dominion over Iraq. Dawisha discusses their meddling in the Iraqi parliamentary deliberations over signing the Anglo-Iraqi treaty, where the High Commissioner 'stormed into the Royal palace with an ultimatum that the treaty be passed forthwith or the Assembly would be dissolved' (Dawisha 2005a: 19). When the Iraqi elections were staged by the British in 1925, 1928 and 1930, they were designed to provide the semblance of democracy instead of ushering in any real reform. As Ofra Bengio notes of the 1925 election, 'Overall, seventy-four of the ninety-eight "proposed" candidates were elected to the assembly, leaving no doubt that the existing Iraqi government – and, behind it, the British – had interfered in the process' (Bengio 2003: 17).

Such interference and manipulation of the democratic processes and practices of Iraq raise a number of interesting questions about the despotic potential of the West. While the British installed governments, falsified referendums and quashed democratic movements and reforms, the Iraqi people continued their struggle towards a more egalitarian and inclusive political order. Between 1920–29, Iraq witnessed an unprecedented diversity in the nation's print sector, with the establishment of 105 newspapers – many of which advocated radical political perspectives (Davis 2005b: 49). Even in their short lifetime, these partisan papers were able to invigorate the Iraqi public sphere, enabling Habermasian rational-critical debate in both the parliament and the streets of the nation. They served as a diligent watchdog of democracy, carefully detailing instances of corruption and nepotism. Collectively, this era brought with it the very seeds of democratization, 'a spirit of dialogue, a willingness to listen to an opposing view, and an ability to compromise if the situation deemed it' (Dawisha 2005a: 20).

With the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty in 1930 and the expiration of Britain's formal authority in 1932, Iraq became the first of the mandated regions to emerge as an 'independent' nation state (Silverfarb 1994: 11–22). Many Iraqis assumed that the United Kingdom would henceforth play a decreasing role inside Iraq, however, the British continued to interfere in

Iraq's domestic politics until the Revolution of 1958. In addition, the democratic and egalitarian steps taken during the 1920s were eased somewhat during the 1930s as Iraq moved through a rather tumultuous decade of politics. This arguably began when the Christian Assyrians of northern Iraq called for complete autonomy within the fledgling nation-state, understandably hopeful that the end of the British mandate might provide the opportunity for them to end their lengthy and broad Diaspora. When the spiritual and political leaders of the Assyrians were not swayed by the central authority in Baghdad and the wider community proved resilient to small military skirmishes, Iraqi General Bakr Sidqi (himself a Kurd from the northern city of Kirkuk) ordered the 'Simele massacres' which left hundreds of Iraqi Assyrians dead by the end of August 1933 (Husry 1974a, 1974b, Joseph 1975).

Within a month of the attack on the Assyrians, King Faisal I died unexpectedly, leaving his twenty-one year old illiterate and relatively inexperienced son, Ghazi Ibn Faisal, in the position of Iraq's supreme leader (crowned King Ghazi I of Iraq). Despite the fact that Ghazi was opposed to continued British interference and was popular with some nationalists and even early pan-Arabists, his legitimacy as ruler of Iraq and his effectiveness in running the affairs of state were constantly brought into question by many Iraqi intellectuals and politicians (Balfour-Paul 1982: 12, Wein 2006: 9). With his power waning, in 1936 King Ghazi supported the first military *coup d'état* in the Arab world, in which General Bakr Sidqi overthrew the civilian government and replaced it with military rule (Lukitz 1995: 81–90). Within a year, however, much of the national army withdrew their support for Sidqi and he was assassinated at Mosul airport. Three years later, in 1939, Ghazi I died in a mysterious car accident which many believed to be the work of the British (Anderson and Stansfield 2004: 18). By the end of the 1930s Iraq had changed dramatically from the developments of the 1920s; it had witnessed the senseless slaughter of Assyrians, ineffective kings, military coups and assassinations of some of the highest officers of the state. In addition, the 1930s also saw a small circle of the elite seize the opportunity provided by the 'independence' of 1932 to exert itself over the public discourse of Iraq and suppress dissent. This is perhaps most evident in the media sector where a new

series of Press Laws imposed limitations such as the censoring of 'criticism of the government or the administration' and the suspension of 'press organs for long and even unlimited periods' (Wien 2006: 54).

However, this is not to say that media and political freedom was completely nullified in the 1930s. Instead, various intellectual organizations, political parties and newspapers were established across Iraq throughout this era, effectively harnessing the emerging public sphere of the time. This included the founding of the Union of Iraqi Artisans' Organizations (*Ittihad Al-Sanaia Al-Iraqiya*) which played an instrumental role in mobilizing the citizenry towards the General Strike of 1931 in order to protest the British proposal of a tax on urban commerce. In terms of actual political parties, in 1931 Iraq witnessed the founding of the Western-inspired social democrats or Ahali Group (*Jamiyat Al-Ahali*, 'The People's Group'). By the mid-1930s Iraq was also home to political parties such as the Iraqi nationalists or Baghdad Club (*Nadi Baghdad*) and the Iraqi Communist Party, as well as the Marxist-leaning Solidarity Club (*Nadi Al-Tadammun*) and the Pan-Arab Al-Muthanna Club (*Nadi Al-Muthanna*) (Bashkin 2009: 52–69, Davis 2005b: 72–5, Tripp 2007 [2000]: 82–5).

Despite the strict press law which had been imposed since 1932, many of these new political parties funded their own papers and sent them out across Iraq in order to propagate their respective political ideologies. Newspapers such as *Al-Ahali* ('The People') gave the Ahali Group considerable influence across Iraq and a voice to many prominent Iraqi intellectuals (Bashkin 2010). Similarly, the Communist party published *Kifah Al-Shab* ('The People's Struggle') and *Al-Inqilab* ('The Revolt'), while the Nationalist Party had *Sada Al-Istiqlal* ('The Echo of Independence'). Aside from these highly partisan journals, other newspapers included *Habezboo*z (a term from Iraqi folklore), a Baghdad paper that used satire to criticize the British occupation (Daragahi 2003: 50, Wien 2006: 55) and, perhaps Iraq's most successful, professional and well-respected paper of this era, *Al-Zaman* ('Time'), published by an Iraqi Christian. It is worth noting here that while many of these papers of the 1930s tended to change their party affiliations and ideological adherences according to the 'personal interests and

sympathies of their owners' they nonetheless provided 'a lively debate on nationalist issues … [and] debates also related to cultural questions beyond the daily affairs' (Wein 2006: 53).

Aside from fostering debate on democracy in their newspapers, the political parties of this time also competed in national elections. Ikha took part in the 1933 elections, reasoning that it had an opportunity to win seats and implement reform. Although the results indicated only a slight change in the Parliament, the party managed to secure a significant minority of 15 seats and went on to criticize the government and the monarchy in the national parliament. According to one source, 'the Ikha members violently attacked the Cabinet's programme as devoid of any measures which would transform the administration created under the mandatory regime into one fit for a truly independent country' (Khadduri 1960 [1951]: 37). In a twist of fate, the dominant bloc that controlled the Parliament and largely supported the monarchy dissolved in a matter of days and Ikha unexpectedly held the balance of power. They promptly sought to nullify the 1930 treaty between Britain and Iraq and called for complete independence. A crisis emerged in the Cabinet before King Faisal intervened and a new Government was formed with Ikha members assuming the prominent post of Prime Minister as well as important portfolios like finance and the interior. Ikha lost much of its credibility, however, for acquiescing to monarchical control and reneging on its demands to rescind the 1930 treaty. Although it did win 12 of 88 seats in the 1934 election and held credible influence through 1935, Ikha were usurped in the coup of 1936 (Khadduri 1960 [1951]: 36–67).

Following the tumultuous but short-lived reign of the military, new elections were held in 1937 and again in 1939. These elections were more tightly controlled in order to produce a Cabinet favourable to the monarchy and less critical of the British (Khadduri 1960 [1951]: 101–2, 143). Despite this, British academic Philip Ireland, writing in 1937 and well ahead of his time, argued that putting aside all its deficiencies, the Iraqi parliament

> has fulfilled an important function in the political life of Iraq. It has attracted the most agile brains in the country; it has reflected although imperfectly, public opinion; and it has served as a brake on legislation which might

otherwise have been forced on the country … It has served to curb the attempts of individual Ministers to assume a dictatorial attitude. Its right of interrogation … has also served to reveal irregularities in administration. It has, moreover, furnished an outlet for Shia aspirations for participation in the Government and has given tribal opinion a limited means of expression through the tribal representatives … The Chamber, together with the conservative Senate of twenty appointed notables, has, notwithstanding its many deficiencies, laid the foundations upon which democratic government, if it is to come to Iraq, must be built. (Ireland 1970 [1937]: 433)

Not long after this, however, the Second World War (1939–45) broke out. When the fighting began, the government of Iraq placed the newspapers and magazines of the nation under tight censorship laws in an attempt to curtail anti-British sentiment. This, coupled with the severe economic conditions which prevailed during the war, had implications for Iraqi civil society and the free press, with many of the smaller papers across the region folding. Politically, the death of King Ghazi I in 1939 had left Iraq with his three-year-old son, King Faisal II, as the official head of state. Being too young to rule, Faisal II's power defaulted to his uncle, the immensely unpopular and fiercely pro-British regent, Prince Abd Al-Ilah. However, the regent's power was mitigated by the anti-British and Pan-Arab views of Iraq's four leading colonels, led by Salah Al-Din Al-Sabbagh and otherwise known as the 'Golden Square'. In 1941 the tension between the monarchy and the army came to a head, with the latter effectively staging a military coup that saw the young king, the regent and the Prime Minister Nuri Al-Said flee into exile (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 100–4). The British were not fond of the Pan-Arab anti-British ideology of the colonels. Despite being already embroiled in the broader events of World War II, in 1941 the British staged the Anglo-Iraq War which saw them quickly defeat the Iraqi army (Silverfarb 1986: 131–41, 1994: 1–7). The four colonels were subsequently tried and executed and the triumvirate of the boy king, the hated regent and the hawkish prime minister were reinstalled in Baghdad, their power propped up by the might of the British but their legitimacy and popularity now permanently undermined in the eyes of most Iraqis.

Perhaps because of this lack of popularity, the regent used the cessation of World War Two to announce a return to the political life of the 1920s, lifting the restrictions on the freedom of the press and calling for the formation or re-emergence of opposition parties. This brought with it an immediate spike in both the number and variety of political parties in Iraq, from pro-government, pro-British parties, to centrist, right- and left-leaning parties, Pan-Arab, Nationalist, and two Marxist parties as well as a blossoming of labour unions, cultural movements and artistic/literary associations. This era also witnessed the emergence of two of Iraq's more influential parties, the nationalist-leaning National Democratic Party (*Hizb Al-Watani Al-Dimuqrati* – NDP) and the Pan-Arab-leaning Independence Party (*Hizb Al-Istiqlal*) as well as a credible expansion of the ICP (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 111–15). Once again, many of these parties spawned their own publications. The NDP controlled 'The Voice of the People' (*Sawt Al-Ahali*) and the Independence Party had 'The Independent Standard' (*Liwa Al-Istiqlal*), both of which launched repeated attacks against the Iraqi government, and Prince Abd Al-Ilah, leading to censorship that forced several name changes. These were joined by the many papers of the ICP which tended to be nationalist in their persuasion including the newly added *Al-Qaida* ('The Base'), *Rayat Al-Shaghila* ('The Worker's Flag') and the later *Ittihad Al-Shab* ('The People's Union') (Dawisha 2005a: 15–16, 22–3).

It appears that, on the whole, the newspapers of this era were relatively free to express diverse opinions. In 1945 the opposition paper *Al-Ahali* published an editorial that was vitriolic in its critique of the government's claim that Iraq was a democracy. It sought to remind the Iraqi people that in a democracy the Parliament works on behalf of the people and in their interests, but that in Iraq the parliament worked instead in the interests of the monarchy and the British (Dawisha 2009: 120). It is perhaps because of such open discussions of democracy that the broader Arab press of the post-Second World War era has been compared by one commentator to that of the press which followed the American Revolution in so far as it was dominated by 'the numerous, tiny enterprise, highly partisan, political party press' (McFadden 1953: 36–7). Speaking specifically about Iraq, Charles Tripp has stated that the press of this era was

politically significant in that it gave 'voice to trenchant criticism of political and economic conditions and … [outlined] ideas for the future of Iraq which were radical in their implications' (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 112).

This optimism is not unjustified given the role that the press was to play in 1948 in mobilizing the people of Iraq to protest against the proposed revision to the Anglo-Iraqi treaty. When word reached the Iraqi opposition that such amendments would bring Iraq further into line with British interests and extend their hegemony over the nation, they were virulent in their dissent, using their newspapers to encourage massive demonstrations on the streets of Baghdad (Silverfarb 1994: 141–55). Unfortunately this series of relatively peaceful demonstrations (dubbed the *Wathba*, 'Outburst') caused a panic amongst Iraq's political elite who ordered the military to use any means necessary to quell the uprising. As well as arresting, imprisoning and torturing many of the demonstrators, the military also opened fire on the crowds several times (Mackey 2002: 148–9). This crack-down also had ramifications for the Iraqi political and media sphere, with the ruling elite taking the drastic step of banning several newspapers and increasing the levels of censorship. Much of the blame for the demonstrations fell on the ICP, the pro-British government was perpetually suspicious of their political ideology and its popularity among the people. The demonstrations gave the government a justification for targeting the group and authorizing the arrest of the ICP's leaders who were later tried and publicly hanged (Salucci 2005: 27–9).

This series of events did little to quell the many Iraqi opposition and political movements, however, and the execution of several of the ICP's most senior members seemed to spur on the movement. Through the early 1950s several new newspapers were created in southern Iraq, including 'The Voice of Struggle' (*Sawt Al-Kifah* in 1951), 'The Worker's Union' and 'The Peasant's Struggle' (*Ittihad Al-Ummal* and *Nidal Al-Fallah*, both in 1952) and 'The Voice of the Euphrates' (*Sawt Al-Furat* in 1954). Around this time, the ICP also began publishing newspapers that catered to the interests of the expanding number of students (*Kifah Al-Talaba* – 'The Students Struggle') and women (*Huquq Al-Mara* – 'Women's Rights') who held party

membership. Such papers helped to spur on various student demonstrations, rural challenges to landowner authority and industrial strikes. The ICP was able to garner support from across Iraq's complex array of ethno-sectarian and religious divides, including smaller minorities such as Christians and Jews, via its argument that, 'while Iraq was an Arab society, real democracy could only be achieved by recognizing its ethnic, linguistic and confessional diversity' (Davis 1992: 80).

Mounting political pressure, combined with the continuing lack of public support for the Iraqi administration created a situation in which the monarchy had little choice but to allow Iraq's opposition parties to take part in the 1954 election. Here, a well-known member of Iraq's oppositional political scene by the name of Kamil Al-Chadirji[5] had the brilliant idea of bringing together Iraq's divergent opposition groups to form the National Electoral Front (*Al-Jabha Al-Intikhabiya Al-Wataniya*, or NEF). In an unprecedented display of solidarity the various political factions of Iraq heeded the advice of Chadirji, and the NEF soon included a 'Supreme Committee' consisting of members from the NDP, the Independence Party, the emerging Baath Party and the ICP. Serving the Supreme Committee was a second tier made up of a wide base of members from Iraqi opposition groups, including various smaller parties and independents.

The success of this model was instantly recognizable since, despite constant police interference, the message was rapidly disseminated to the broader Iraqi population who came out onto the streets to voice their approval in various campaign rallies. The subsequent elections have been heralded as 'not only the freest but also the most spirited in modern Iraqi history' (Davis 2005b: 102). This success was also felt at the polls where, despite a relatively short campaign period, the falsification of votes and intimidation and interference from government officials, the NEF was able to garner an unprecedented, if paltry, 14 of the 135 seats (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 132). The central government was unnerved by the show of solidarity amongst

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[5] A former member of the National Party and the Ahali Group, Al-Chadirji later founded the NDP and served as the editor of the party's newspaper, Al-Ahali, later renamed Sawt Al-Ahali.

Iraq's political opposition groups and by the electoral support they received nationwide. The elections not only secured the NEF seats in Baghdad and Mosul (Iraq's two largest cities at the time), they also threatened Nuri Al-Said's parliamentary control. The new parliament met once before being dissolved by a royal decree (Batatu 1982 [1978]: 686–7). The opposition parties, their newspapers and their protests, were suppressed and, with the subsequent elections going ahead uncontested, the hegemony of the ruling elite was restored (Warriner 1962 [1957]: 125). Nuri was then able to conduct a small war 'against any writers, journalists and academics whom he regarded as critical of the status quo', revoking the licences of opposition parties and introducing restrictive legislation to further curtail 'the freedom of the press and the right to hold public meetings and organize demonstrations' (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 133).

Conclusion

Although the Colonial era of Iraq's history ends with the suppression of media and political freedoms following the 1954 elections, Al-Musawi describes the political climate of the early 1950s in Iraq as running 'opposite to an oppressive but restless political climate, as the educated classes were effectively involved in disseminating a culture of democracy and resistance: democracy for the Iraqis, against martial laws and censorship, and resistance to British virtual control of the many cabinets that spanned the period in question' (Al-Musawi 2006: 115). Al-Musawi's comment might be taken as indicative of the political climate of the entire Colonial period which reveals an alternative Iraqi history, a history in which the nation's public sphere played a pivotal role in mobilizing the people, encouraging democratic participation, stimulating wide debate, coordinating dissent and serving as the watchdog of the elite. More to the point, as Eric Davis has argued, Colonial Iraq also 'established a historical memory to which Iraqi intellectuals can return as an inspiration for a transition to democracy' (Davis 2005b: 85).

However, an examination of Colonial Iraq also raises questions about the discourse of Western democracy. In their occupation of Iraq, Britain – one of the world's strongest advocates of democracy, home of the *Magna Carta*, the modern parliament, the first daily newspaper and the Fourth Estate – can be seen to have all but abandoned the ideals such institutions and

documents are said to represent. In their creation and occupation of Iraq, the British not only brought with them the Orientalist legacy common throughout the Colonial period but also installed the nation-state's first Oriental despot in the form of a foreign monarch. They sought to quash democratic movements wherever they found them, they interfered in the nation's parliament and demanded agreement to various suspect treaties. Such actions were not only driven by their desire for Iraq's acquiescence to the will of empire, but also by broader discourses, such as Oriental despotism, which decreed that Iraq was not only unable to govern itself but was also incapable of sophisticated political structures such as democracy. The Colonial period of Iraqi history not only brings to the fore the problematic nature of this widely held assumption, it also reveals the contrapuntal discourses of Western civilization: a force for democracy and human rights on its own soil, a force for despotism and oppression abroad.