

## Chapter 6

### Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq

The images we possess of the current political situation in Iraq are somewhat distorted. To be sure, kidnapping, political violence and sabotage of oil facilities are ongoing and present a serious threat to political stability ... However, there is another reality that has been largely ignored by the Western media. Very little mention has been made of the myriad examples of Iraqis who, since the fall of Saddam and the Baath, have been actively involved in civic life – such as establishing municipal councils, publishing newspapers and journals, and forming artistic organizations – and who are committed to working for democratic change. (Davis 2005a: 241)

#### **The Discourses of Democracy and the Re-Colonisation of Iraq**

On 17 March 2003, President Bush addressed the United States and the world, offering Saddam Hussein an ultimatum: he and his sons were to leave Iraq within 48 hours or the coalition would launch its ‘pre-emptive strike’ (Bush 2003a). Despite the fact that by the eve of the war the notion of a military intervention in Iraq was demonstrably unpopular across the globe, Bush fulfilled his promise, stating on 19 March 2003 that

At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger. On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein’s ability to wage war. (Bush 2003b)

However, when it was discovered that the initial motives for entering Iraq – Saddam’s alleged stockpile of WMD and his links to Al-Qaeda – were grievous intelligence errors, the Bush administration began to spin the war’s *raison d’être* and redefine the parameters of victory. A central tenet of this approach was to begin speaking about democracy as if it had always been one of the aims of the war itself. In a speech presented before the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, President Bush claimed that although bringing democracy to Iraq would be a

massive and difficult undertaking – it is worth our effort, it is worth our sacrifice, because we know the stakes. The failure of Iraqi democracy would embolden terrorists around the world, increase dangers to the American people, and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region. Iraqi democracy will succeed – and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Teheran – that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution. (Bush 2003c)

The notion that the US could use its enormous influence and military power to not only pre-emptively attack independent nation-states and overthrow existing regimes, but also to install democratic governments in their place is exclusive to the former administration and has come to be termed the ‘Bush doctrine’ (Jervis 2003). In addition, the Bush administration also held the overly simplistic view that by installing democracy in Iraq they would enable a ‘domino effect’ across the region where autocratic regimes would have no choice but to convert to robust democracies. In a sense, the Bush doctrine can be seen to be reminiscent of the Colonial era in that it claims to be a civilizing force aimed at liberating the barbaric non-Western world from Oriental despotism. It also taps into the discourse of Western democracy by asserting that the United States and the broader Western world is the legitimate legatee of democracy and has the right to democratize – under military force and occupation if necessary – the non-Western world.

That Iraq could become a democracy was widely ridiculed by the international news media, however, as well as by prominent academics, senior policy-makers and bureaucrats. Senior civil servants who worked with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) which governed Iraq during the earliest days of the occupation expressed very serious doubts about Iraq as a potential democracy. These included eminent figures such as Rory Stewart, who, in 2003–04, was the deputy coordinator of Maysan and later a senior advisor in Dhi Qar. In his *Occupational Hazards: My Time Governing in Iraq*, Stewart suggests that Iraq is particularly

unique in the broader story of human civilization because of its lack of democratic potential. He writes:

I had never believed that mankind, unless overawed by a strong government, would fall inevitably into violent chaos. Societies were orderly, I thought, because human cultures were orderly ... But Maysan made me reconsider. A secure and functioning government was not emerging of its own accord.  
(Stewart 2006: 81)

Here, Stewart seems to suggest that Iraq is a nation predisposed to violence, chaos and despotism and incapable of tolerance, inclusion and peace. The further implication here is that these problems are so unparalleled that one could even question the humanity of the Iraqi people. If 'mankind' or 'human cultures' are orderly and peaceful, and Iraq is naturally violent and disorderly, then the conclusion must be that this is not a human culture at all (Isakhan 2010a).

Similar sentiments emerged in a great deal of scholarly literature that attempted to explain why the establishment of democracy will at least be difficult, if not impossible in Iraq. In 2003 Andreas Wimmer ominously warned that 'the seeds of democracy may have difficulties to germinate in the sandy soils of Iraq' (Wimmer 2003: 111). Others claimed that Iraq has 'little tradition of power-sharing' (Byman 2003a: 57) or 'experience with democracy' (Benomar 2004: 95). There was said to be no 'society in Iraq to turn into a democracy' and that the people had not 'learned democratic practices' (Byman 2003a: 59). Iraq had been a nation of 'uneasy order maintained through rations of oppression and fear' (Benomar 2004: 95). Daniel Byman offered a list of factors that he believed would inhibit the spread of democracy in Iraq including, among others, 'a lack of cohesive identity to unify Iraq's different communities ... bellicose elites who pursue adventurism abroad and whip up tension at home, a poorly organized political leadership, and a lack of a history of democracy' (Byman 2003b: 49). What is particularly interesting here is that these scholars chose to use words like 'tradition,' 'society,' 'identity' and

'history' to suggest that Iraq has long been home to a stagnant culture that is inhospitable to diversity, debate and difference.

Along similar lines, the Western media coverage of the democratization of Iraq not only emphasized the ongoing violence and the disagreements between Iraq's various ethno-religious groups, but also argued that Iraq simply lacked the social and political prerequisites necessary to build towards a democratic form of government (Isakhan 2007b, 2008a). Once again, Iraq was seen as 'a society riven by centuries of religious and ethnic conflicts with little or no experience with representative institutions' (Kissinger and Shultz 2005). Iraqis were 'not used to democracy ... [with] little tradition of tolerance' (*Australian* 2006); they were trapped in a barbaric world in which 'violence remains the more pragmatic way to achieve justice and to protect one's interests' (Clemons 2005). This uncritical and careless adoption of Orientalist ideologies is clearly problematic and stems from the notion that even when given democracy and freedom, the people of the Middle East are too backward and barbaric to embrace a future free of tyranny and despotism. Here, any examples of collective forms of government, egalitarian societies or democratic political movements within Iraqi history are all but eschewed in favour of clichés of despotism, ineptitude and violence.

The convergence of such bureaucratic, scholarly and media discourse in the Re-Colonial period is startling in its familiarity. It mirrors and indeed draws upon the vast array of discourses that were employed in the Colonial period in Iraq and elsewhere, utilizing the same language of Oriental backwardness and the need for Western dominance. This is not altogether surprising given that the effort to invade and occupy Iraq cannot be wholly disentangled from a Colonial project which saw the West only begrudgingly relent its subjugation of the non-European world during the last two centuries. Or perhaps the project of Colonialism should be understood not so much as having come to an end (a direct affront to the curious prefix of 'post' in 'post-Colonial studies'), but as having momentarily subsided as Western powers regrouped and devised new economic, military, and ideological mechanisms of power. As several scholars have recently noted, the invasion and occupation of Iraq might best be described as ushering in what is

referred to here as Re-Colonial Iraq (2003–11) (Gopal and Lazarus 2006, Gregory 2004, Lazarus 2006, Spencer 2006). Such theoretical work was pre-empted by Tariq Ali who argued that the invasion and occupation of Iraq not only represents the re-colonisation of this particular sovereign nation-state by Western powers, but also marked a return to the broader Colonial project ‘that was disrupted by the twentieth century and is now back on course’ (Ali 2003: 185).

As the central aim of the project being undertaken here is to problematize and scrutinize Orientalist discourse via a closer examination of Iraq’s history, this chapter seeks to re-interpret the post-Saddam period and the alternative discourses of democracy emanating from within Re-Colonial Iraq. It builds on the preceding chapters by detailing the complex public sphere of the post-Saddam era and points to the inclusive nature of the positive developments that have occurred across the nation since 2003. The first part discusses the post-Saddam media landscape which has played a positive role in covering the nation’s difficult transition to democracy. The second part of this chapter documents and examines the Iraqi people’s exercise of their democratic right to protest and the influence these protests have had on the politics of the post-Saddam era. The chapter concludes that Iraqi citizens who play an active role in their own governance and participate in democratic mechanisms such as elections and mass demonstrations are helping to create a more robust democracy.

### **Elections and the Public Sphere**

With the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, Iraq’s media environment was changed forever. Almost overnight it transformed from being Saddam’s tightly controlled propaganda machine to one of the most diverse media environments on earth. By the middle of 2003, Iraq was home to more than 20 radio stations, around 15 Iraqi-owned television stations, with approximately 200 Iraqi-owned and run newspapers published across the country. Even smaller regional towns such as Najaf boasted more than 30 newspapers in a city of only 300,000 people. Most of these new television stations, radio stations and newspapers were started by the seemingly countless political parties, religious factions and/or ethnic groups of post-Saddam Iraq, each of them jostling for support and legitimacy in the nation’s struggle from despotism to democracy

(Cochrane 2006). As Ibrahim Al-Marashi points out, the Iraqi media sector has witnessed the rise of various ethno-religious sectarian and highly partisan ‘media empires’ which have evolved into ‘quite a pervasive element in Iraq’s Fourth Estate’ (Al-Marashi 2007: 104). Foremost among these are those controlled by the major Kurdish political parties (the PUK and the KDP) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), those controlled by the two largest Shia parties, Dawah and SCIRI, and Shia religio-political movements like the Sadr Trend, as well as those owned by key Sunni, Christian, Turkomen and other ethno-religious groups. There are also those controlled by smaller political parties like the ICP, the INA and the INC. These publications have been joined by those which claim to be free of any specific political, religious or sectarian allegiance but which desire to report the news in a professional and objective manner.<sup>1</sup>

Several problems have accompanied Iraq’s divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile media landscape. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to detail each of these, it is worth mentioning that some of the more serious factors include: the absence of an appropriate legal framework; the ongoing dangers faced by journalists whose death toll continues to climb;<sup>2</sup> the uneven quality and dubious professionalism of some media organizations; and the interference in Iraq’s media by various regional powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran), the occupying forces (particularly the US and UK), as well as by the Iraqi government and the KRG (Isakhan 2009b).

---

<sup>1</sup> Earlier work by the author includes a more detailed overview of the post-Saddam Iraqi media landscape (Isakhan 2006: 136-46, 2008b, 2009b: 10-2), including a set of detailed tables that document the most significant outlets (Isakhan 2009a: 257-75).

<sup>2</sup> Iraq remains one of the most dangerous nations for the press as is demonstrated by the Annual Report of Paris-based *Reporters Sans Frontieres* (‘Reporters Without Borders’) which designated Iraq as having a ‘Very Serious Situation’ in terms of press freedom since 2003 until it was downgraded in the 2010 report to a ‘Difficult Situation’ (‘Annual Report and Press Freedom Index’ 2009, 2010). As with the death toll of the overall Iraq War, however, the number of Iraqi journalists killed since 2003 increases daily making reliable and up-to-date figures difficult to ascertain. Arguably the best, and certainly the most chilling, accounts of civilian casualties in Iraq also concern the coalition efforts to cover up the carnage (Hil and Wilson 2007, Otterman and Hil 2010).

Despite these manifold problems, there are several reasons to be optimistic about the contemporary media landscape of Iraq. First among these is the fact that the Iraqi media can be seen to have played an overwhelmingly positive role – despite their inherent biases – in fostering the emergence of a renewed public sphere in Iraq. They have been instrumental in serving the number of functions that a free press is expected to perform in a nascent democratic order like post-Saddam Iraq.

This role began as far back as February 2004, when the Iraqi media began to offer its views on the Interim Governing Council's (IGC) deliberations over a temporary constitution. In a plethora of opinion pieces and news articles across Iraq's divergent media, the nation's journalists were generally critical of US involvement. This included interference from the head of the CPA, Lewis Paul Bremer, especially his attempt to avoid any reference to Islamic law in the wording of the constitution itself. Others implored the IGC to avoid the temptation to skew the wording of the constitution in favour of their own interests or those of their particular ethno-political group. As Abd-Al-Munim Al-Aasam opined in *Azzaman*,

All those who have gathered around the conference table to discuss the draft interim constitution ... would do well to rule out any possibility of coming up with anything tailored so as to be in full harmony with their own views. They are duty-bound to put aside the unworthy ploy of threatening to rouse the public into civil war in a bid to have their own ideas incorporated in the constitution. Any such practice would run counter to the reality of the political, ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity that is characteristic of Iraq.  
(Al-Aasam 2004)

When campaigning for the January 2005 election began on 15 December 2004, information about it almost immediately 'permeated every part of the Iraqi media, providing at least the show of a nascent democracy in action' (Usher 2005b). Throughout the campaign period Iraqi radio stations, newspapers, television channels and websites played a critical role in not only promoting certain political parties and their stated ideologies and agendas, but also in encouraging Iraqis to defy the insurgent and terrorist threats and take part in the election

(Dawisha 2005b: 38). Throughout the electoral campaign the German government funded a daily half hour broadcast that covered various aspects of the election. They selected 25 young Iraqi journalists (all under the age of 30) and provided training for them in neighbouring Jordan. These young journalists then returned to Iraq to seek out stories relating to the election which were broadcast on Iraqi stations such as the independent *Radio Dijla* ('Tigris'), and the KDP's *Voice of Iraqi Kurdistan*, as well as being made available for download on the internet. Over the course of the campaign these short broadcasts included profiles of politicians, political parties and the various coalitions that emerged in post-Saddam Iraq as well as comment by foreign election observers (Usher 2004). In addition to these half hour broadcasts *Radio Dijla* also ran its regular programming which encouraged Iraqis to phone-in and offer their opinion on the elections as well as quiz shows that posed questions such as: 'Which is better, a pre-set democratic model or one that is in harmony with Iraq's culture?' (Radio Dijla cited in Usher 2005b).

Iraq's leading television stations, the state-run *Al-Iraqiya*, and the privately owned *Al-Sharqiya* ('The Eastern One') and *Al-Diyar* ('The Homeland'), led the domestic television market. They screened campaign advertisements ranging from the techno-savvy efforts of groups such as Allawi's Iraqi List and the coalition of Shia groups known as the United Iraqi Alliance, through to the hackneyed efforts of the smaller parties (Usher 2005b). All three of these channels worked in the public interest by disseminating information regarding the curfews, restrictions and security measures that had been placed across the nation in the lead up to the election. *Al-Iraqiya* aired statements by Iraq's religious leaders urging Iraqis to vote and provided the kind of access to the political elite rarely seen in even the most highly esteemed Western media (Misterek 2005). For example, it broadcast a weekly phone-in programme hosted by the incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, who answered unscreened calls from Iraqis keen to discuss various issues with their leader and air their frustrations (Usher 2005b).

As the election drew closer, Iraq's print media played an increasingly important role in raising and discussing several key issues related to the forthcoming election. The independent *Al-Dustour* published a collection of in-depth articles including those critical of the incumbent Iraqi government, those which provided details of some of Iraq's various smaller political factions, those which countered rumours about the election, those which discussed the thorny issue of religion and politics and those which called for peace and unity (Al-Shaykh 2005a, 2005c, 2005e, 2005f, 2005g, Jamil 2005, Zaydan 2005a, 2005b). On the issue of whether or not the elections should be postponed, a wide range of views and opinions were expressed in papers as diverse as *Azzaman*, the INC's *Al-Mutamar*, Iraqi Hezbollah's *Al-Bayyannah* ('The Evidence'), the Dawah party's *Al-Bayan* ('The Dispatch' or 'The Manifesto') and the eponymous *Dawah* party paper, *Al-Dawah* (Al-Muqdadi 2005, Al-Pachachi 2005, Al-Raziqi 2005, Al-Shimmari 2005, Al-Ubaydi 2005, Humadi 2005, Khudayyir 2005, Rasul 2005b). Meanwhile, Kurdish papers such as the independent *Hawlati*, the PUK's *Kurdistani Nuwe* ('New Kurdistan') and the KDP's *Xebat* ('Struggle'), ran a collection of stories both before and after the election that detailed the various Kurdish concerns and developments, such as the issue of federation, Kurdish regional elections, unity among the many different people of Kurdistan and the future status of Kirkuk (*Hawlati* 2005a, 2005b, *Kurdistani Nuwe*, 2005a, 2005b, *Xebat* 2005a, 2005b).

The Iraqi press also fostered a lively and diverse discussion on the merits and tenets of democracy. Various Shia backed organs, such as Dawah's *Al-Bayan* and SCIRI's *Al-Adala* ('The Justice'), published several articles that were often unrestrained in their optimism. Of these, the Shia papers are adamant that the Iraqi people must not miss this great opportunity to 'pave the way for the rise of the rule of law, in which democracy, freedom, security, and sovereignty will prevail' (Al-Juwari 2005). As if to capture this enthusiasm and summarize these sentiments, an editorial which appeared just days before the election in *Al-Bayan* stated:

The countdown has begun for a great, historic day in the life of our people. On this day, the people will master their own destiny and future when they will select their representatives to the constitutional assembly that will draft the

permanent constitution and choose an elected government expressing their will and working to achieve their hopes and aspirations. The responsibility for making this election a success does not rest only with the government or the electoral commission that will supervise and ensure a fair vote. Rather, it depends, above all, on our people through their broad participation, with all their sects, ethnic groups, political forces and social categories. We believe the high turnout will be the most telling response to the terrorists and killers who seek to confiscate Iraqi people's will. With it, they will tell those terrorist they are much more stronger than their criminal means. (*Al-Bayan* 2005b)

Similar sentiments can be found across the pages of the INC's *Al-Mutamar*, where writers such as Shaykh Ali Abd-Al-Husayn Kammunah implored the citizens of Iraq to take part in the 'great democratic process for which we have waited long and offered dear sacrifices' (Kammunah 2005). Similarly, Nabil Al-Qassab argued that the election would foster Iraqi unity and 'guarantee the rights of all sects, ethnic groups, and nationalities' (Al-Qassab 2005). *Al-Mutamar* seems to have been such a strong advocate of the elections that it appeared to view them as something of a silver bullet, capable of rectifying all of Iraq's complex problems. Consider the words of Salman Al-Shammari who wrote that

not only are the Iraqi elections a positive step on the path leading to shortening the occupation's life and solving the political problem in Iraq and a positive and good initiative to boost and deepen the principles of democracy, plurality, and rule of law in the country, but they are also the key and main way to get rid of the security and economic crises that Iraq suffers from. (Al-Shammari 2005)

The independent press of Iraq seemed to largely follow his line of argument. Much of the coverage in *Al-Dustour* emphasized the need for national unity, with Ibrahim Zaydan opining that 'In order to build a pluralist, democratic Iraq, as we hope, we have to open the doors for participation to everybody because Iraq is home to all Iraqis, rather than to a particular sect, ethnic group, tribe or religion' (Zaydan 2005b). To some degree this was echoed by the chief editor of *Al-Dustour*, Basim Al-Shaykh, who claimed that Iraq needed to seek 'God's help and

rise up as one man with their hands united to place the voting card deciding their destiny in the ballot box holding their aspirations for tomorrow' (Al-Shaykh 2005b). However, *Al-Dustour's* coverage also came with a stern warning to those who would manipulate the Iraqi elections or the broader body politic to suit their own ends. 'Let it be known from now on' begins another piece by Al-Shaykh,

that the average Iraqi will tolerate no mandate other than that dictated by his own conscience. Advocates of fake heavenly agendas had better steer away from Iraq and Iraqis, for we have had enough at the hands of opportunists touting bright religious and nationalist slogans. Let them seek their fortune elsewhere, for we have made a solemn vow to root out anyone stalking our beloved Iraq, regardless of their race or colour and no matter how dazzlingly bright their banners may be. (Al-Shaykh 2005c)

It is not surprising that the various independent papers, as well as those controlled by the Shia and Kurdish parties or the INC and INA were relatively optimistic about the January elections, given that they each had much to gain politically. Less optimistic were the Sunni journals which represented the increasingly disenfranchised minority which had ruled Iraq since its inception in the 1920s. A little over a week before the election, the Sunni organ of the Association of Muslim Scholars, *Al-Basair* ('The Insight'), expressed its concerns regarding the forthcoming election which included the 'insufficient legal and technical preparations, lack of security, the occupation forces' total domination of security, and most important of all, they aim at legitimizing the occupation of Iraq' (*Al-Basair* 2005). This issue is raised in several articles in the same issue of *Al-Basair*. Prominent Iraqi writer Karim Latif Al-Dulaymi referred to the Iraqi elections as 'a poisonous honey' which has been 'given by the US to Iraq in order to legitimize the occupation of the country' (Al-Dulaymi 2005).

In terms of the watch-dog function of the media, the well-respected Kurdish newspaper *Hawlati* took the unrivalled step of publishing the list of candidates on the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan in the lead up to the election itself. What made *Hawlati's* move significant was that not only had no other media published such a list due to security concerns,

but also that about a dozen Kurdish candidates were former Baathists (Glantz 2005). Other newspapers waited until after the election to raise their concerns. In mid-February 2005 Iraq's *Azzaman* published an unofficial list of the candidates elected to the Iraqi National Assembly while several other newspapers continued to publish their concerns about the make-up of the post-election assembly (*Al-Adala* 2005, *Al-Bayan* 2005a, *Al-Mutamar* 2005b, *Azzaman* 2005). Iraq's highbrow independent paper *Al-Mada* ('The View') controversially accused the Iraqi Council of Commissioners of having pre-defined the number of seats and percentages for political entities which would go on to form the National Assembly following the election (*Al-Mada* 2005b).

Despite such serious concerns, immediately following the January election much of Iraq's diverse media landscape expressed almost unanimous praise for the conduct of the elections and their significance for the future of the nation. The jubilation of many Iraqi journalists was splashed across the pages of several important newspapers (*Al-Bayan* 2005d, *Al-Bayyannah* 2005, *Al-Mada* 2005a, *Al-Mutamar* 2005a, *Al-Sandhuq* 2005, *Baghdad* 2005). As just one example, *Al-Bayan* printed the following comment on the election,

It was a historic day in the life of our people. On this day, Iraqis taught the peoples of the region a great lesson in democracy. The first winner and victor in these elections is, beyond any doubt, the Iraqi people. This, in itself, is quite enough for all those who contributed to writing this national epic to feel proud. It is, indeed, a remarkable feat added to Iraqi civilization records. (*Al-Bayan* 2005c)

However, it did not take long for the Iraqi press to begin lobbying the newly elected Iraqi government regarding various concerns and issues which it saw as central to the success of the new Iraq (*Al-Bayyannah* 2005, *Al-Tikriti* 2005, *Rasul* 2005a). What Iraq needed now, according to Rida Al-Zahir of *Tariq Al-Shab*, was 'national accord among the political forces that believe in democracy to build the country' (Al-Zahir 2005). This would not only 'see an end to the US occupation' as Riyadh Abu Mulhim put it in an article published by *Al-Mutamar*, but enable 'the constitutional institutions required to guarantee that Iraqis will get the sort of government

they yearn for, free of sectarian bias and representative of the nation's cultural makeup' (Mulhim 2005). Another major concern of Iraqi journalists was that of the culture of corruption that had been pervasive throughout government institutions under the Baathist regime (Al-Baldawi 2005, *Al-Mashriq* 2005, Zaki 2005). On this issue *Al-Dustour's* Basim Al-Shaykh implored the new administration to 'purge government departments and security offices of the lingering corrupt practices inherited from the past' (Al-Shaykh 2005d).

This close monitoring of Iraqi state politics by the nation's media was to continue at the time of the country-wide referendum which effectively ratified the Iraqi Constitution in October 2005. Not only did the Iraqi media, across its rich array of formats and persuasions, play a critical role in disseminating the draft constitution in the lead up to the referendum, but television stations such as *Al-Sharqiya* also hosted a phone-in programme to discuss the finer details of the document, while various newspapers discussed the constitution's merits and drawbacks (Al-Ansari 2005, *Al-Shahid* 2005). One of Iraq's more influential Islamist papers, *Al-Adala*, also featured an editorial which argued that the ratification of the constitution was itself indicative of the fact that

Iraqis have defeated their enemies: terrorists, dark forces and those who dream of a return of the unfair equation. What has been achieved for Iraq would not have seen the light of day had it not been for the sacrifices by Iraqis and their friends. The time of coercion and pressure has gone for good, and the time of freedom and democracy has come. Democracy and freedom have been created in Iraq by all the honourable men in the world who have stood by Iraq in its ordeal, offering all that is dear to them. (Khlayf 2005)

In December 2005, as Iraqis prepared to nominate a permanent government, Iraq's media landscape once again buzzed with the excitement of the looming election. Newspapers across Iraq were awash with political advertising and long articles explained the complexity of Iraq's various political coalitions as well as providing details of polling stations and how to vote. Iraq's television stations took the unprecedented step of offering free political advertising, which immediately saw a series of non-partisan and well-produced, if rather emotive, short

films screened which encouraged Iraqis to participate in the election. Less emotive were the government-funded advertisements which also gave details of how to vote as well as the location of polling booths. The free airtime meant that many of Iraq's smaller minorities and political factions were able to broadcast their own amateur advertisements, although they did complain that they were not given equal airtime and were simply unable to compete with the larger parties and coalitions (Usher 2005a). Despite such complaints, the fact that every legitimate political party in Iraq had access to free airtime on the nation's state-run television channel indicates the degree to which the Iraqi media served as a locus where the general public had ready access to a diverse range of political opinion, policy and debate (Dawisha and Diamond 2006: 97).

Despite the free advertising, most of Iraq's TV stations took a decidedly biased stance in the lead up to the elections. For example, both *Al-Sharqiya* and *Al-Iraqiya*, which had previously been lauded for their professional and objective reporting, were unwavering in their support of the incumbent government of Iyad Allawi and his ministers, repeatedly airing his arty black-and-white commercials (Al-Marashi 2007: 109, Usher 2005a). The SCIRI-owned *Al-Furat* on the other hand, revealed its deeply partisan nature by refusing to offer free airtime or screen paid advertisements from political parties other than the United Iraqi Alliance (which was a reincarnation of the January 2005 Unified Iraqi Coalition) (Al-Marashi 2007: 109, Usher 2005a). The Sunni parties also managed to have a voice in the December elections via their newly established *Baghdad* satellite channel. Having suffered the consequences of boycotting the January election, many of the various Sunni political movements formed the Al-Tawafuq Front in 2005 and quickly set about establishing the channel. In a bid to counter the clearly partisan nature of their rival stations, *Baghdad* only featured advertisements for the Al-Tawafuq Front in the lead up to the December election (Al-Marashi 2007: 111).

Following the December 2005 elections, a six-month political stalemate emerged among the various political entities as to exactly what the new Iraqi government should look like and who should hold the key positions of power. This impasse was eventually resolved with

Dawah's little known Nuri Al-Maliki nominated as Prime Minister, his government finally taking office in May 2006. Although the many divisions on the path to forming a government were resolved peacefully, this short period of divisiveness set the tone for political infighting and was a forerunner to the sharp upsurge in ethno-religious motivated sectarianism and violence that was to follow. Over the next two years Iraq descended into a particularly dark and unprecedented period in which ethno-religious factions, who mostly lived in peaceful co-existence, waged bitter and deadly battles against each other (Isakhan 2012c).

Consequently, this became a central concern for the Iraqi press who covered and criticized the unfolding conflict, demonstrating not only journalistic standards of the highest order but also remarkable bravery. As just one example, *Azzaman* was very critical of the mass ethno-religious violence that was tearing Iraq apart, and held to account the Iraqi government, various sectarian politicians and the militias they controlled (Abbas 2007, Al-Shaboot 2007, Maraai 2006a, 2006b). What was most significant about the Iraqi press of this time, however, was the connection so many journalists drew between the violence and the type of democracy that the US had imposed on Iraq. They condemned virtually every aspect of the US occupation: the failure to foster political solutions and reconciliation, the subsequent violence it had fostered, the troop surge of 2007, as well as the merits and drawbacks of a complete US withdrawal (Al-Khafaji 2006, Allo 2007, Sami 2006). Perhaps the most virulent, articulate and consistent criticisms on the pages of *Azzaman*, however, came from its Editor-in-Chief, Dr Fatih Abdulsalam<sup>3</sup> (Abdulsalam 2006b, 2007a, 2007c, 2007e, 2007f). In a nuanced account of post-Saddam Iraq, Abdulsalam reserved much of his critique for the Iraqi government which he viewed as being in complete disarray (Abdulsalam 2006a, 2007b). He denounced Iraq's politicians who he saw as stubborn, ineffective, corrupt and held hostage to religious clerics. For

---

<sup>3</sup> Abdulsalam is an Iraqi author and academic, as well as being the Editor-in-Chief of the International Edition of the London-based Arabic daily newspaper, *Azzaman*. Formerly, Dr Abdulsalam worked in Iraq as a professor of modern Arabic literature and criticism at the University of Mosul.

Abdulsalam this was ‘an embarrassing situation because none of the influential political factions is ready to compromise despite the fact that the country is imploding’ (Abdulsalam 2007d).

While much of 2006 and 2007 was particularly grim, the US troop surge of 2007 and the increasing efficiency of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) – among a host of other factors – did see increased stability and security across Iraq by 2008. This meant that the nation was relatively peaceful when Iraqis went to the polls in January 2009 for Iraq’s provincial elections in which some 400 parties and 14,500 Iraqi candidates registered to compete. As with the lead up to the 2005 national elections, the Iraqi press went to great lengths to provide details on the various parties and candidates and to encourage the Iraqi people to vote. Among the many Iraqi news outlets, *Aswat Al-Iraq* (‘Voices of Iraq’) stood out for the quality, objectivity and neutrality of its reporting. Throughout this period *Aswat Al-Iraq* lived up to its name, airing the voices of Iraqis of all backgrounds and shades of opinion. The paper frequently included commentary from experts and analysts of Iraqi politics, representatives of the various political parties, University professors, writers, artists and poets, key figures like Nuri Al-Maliki and Jalal Talabani and everyday ‘man on the street’ interviews (*Aswat Al-Iraq* 2009c). It also included the voices of the most marginalized Iraqis – women, the disabled, and tiny ethno-religious minorities like the Yazidis (*Aswat Al-Iraq* 2008b, 2009f, 2010c).

*Aswat Al-Iraq* also did an excellent job of promoting the elections across Iraq. To this end, they focused much of their coverage on the Sunni-dominated parts of Iraq in order to avoid a repeat of the mass Sunni electoral abstinence of 2005 (*Aswat Al-Iraq* 2008a, 2009e). In other parts of Iraq, such as the Shia-dominated south, *Asawt Al-Iraq* interviewed a host of Iraqi poets, authors, artists and intellectuals in Basra who were very positive about the 2009 provincial elections, seeing them as an opportunity for change. Among them, Iraqi author Abdilghafar Al-Itwi argued that

This electoral round is important, because it would affect the path of democracy ... From now on, being [a] member in the provincial council will

not be an easy issue to be achieved, as it would rely on providing services to people (Al-Itwi cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2009b).

Others demonstrated an intimate awareness of the problems plaguing Iraqi politics. One Iraqi political writer, Abdulameer Al-Mijar, pointed out that sectarian politics had created a political elite in Iraq who had failed to adapt to the evolving nature of political consciousness in designing and articulating their key policies and in crafting their rhetoric. As he put it, in the elections of 2005, ‘Shiites voted for Shiites, Sunnis for Sunnis, Kurds for Kurds’ but today, the Iraqi people ‘want parties and entities that serve them, not those that represent part of their identities’ (Al-Mijar cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2009d). Along similar lines, Iraqi writer and political analyst, Gomaa Al-Halafi, stated that while ‘The coming elections are considered as an important move in the democratic and constitutional life in Iraq’ the ‘Big parties which took part in the previous elections still dominate the political life in Iraq and have the money and means, including ways that violate the elections law’ (Al-Halafi cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2009a). Such concern was certainly warranted as the elections did see many familiar faces return to power with Nuri Al-Maliki’s recently formed State of Law Coalition (SLC) winning a considerable proportion of the votes.

Just over a year after the provincial elections, in March 2010, Iraq held its next round of national polls. Once again, the Iraqi press did an excellent job of covering the lead up to the vote, demonstrating their ability to serve as the Fourth Estate of this fledgling democracy. Beginning in October 2009, journalists discussed a plethora of issues facing Iraqi democracy and did not recoil from writing about some of the harder aspects of the electoral process. Abdallah Al-Sukuti, writing in *Al-Mada*, argued that ‘the gruesome massacres we are witnessing’ are part of a broader insurgent plot ‘to get serious about derailing the approaching Iraqi public elections’ (Al-Sukuti 2009). Others blamed the violence on the Iraqi government, with Fatih Abd-Al-Salam of *Azzaman* arguing that the situation has been ‘created by a persistent political failure to come up with a vision of the future that can make the necessary shift from the language of liquidation, eradication, assassination’ to a democratic culture of the ‘open-minded

inclusiveness required to salvage Iraq from sinking forever' (Abdulsalam 2009). As Sabah Al-Lami put it in the independent *Al-Mashriq* ('The Arab East'),

We have to realize that the forthcoming elections ... will either save Iraq from the deteriorations of the 2003 invasion and the 2005 elections or turn the country into a graveyard for democracy as a cheap compensation for all its suffering ... Iraq's plight is the result of non-existent political stability and lack of ideological wisdom at the levels of both government and opposition.  
(Al-Lami 2009)

As the election drew closer, the Iraqi press continued to host varying opinions about the challenges and prospects of democracy in Iraq. *Aswat Al-Iraq* included opinions by leading experts that were very optimistic about Iraq's elections. The published comments by Kirkuk's deputy governor, Adwar Uraha claimed: 'The increase in the number of electoral lists is a kind of the new democratic practice and ... This multiplicity is an indicator of the society's diversity and the development of the citizens' mentality' (Uraha cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2010e). Elsewhere, Bassem Saheb of the Iraqi Communist Party stated that 'The elections were a national occasion to congratulate our people on their success with this great performance. It proved that Iraqis are a civilized people who are able to overcome pain and to reach the rank of democratic country in a short stage' (Saheb cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2010f).

Similarly, in a series of articles published in *PUK Media*, Qubad J. Talabani correctly predicted that 'We will likely see shortly some close outcomes, potentially leading to disputed results ... This will create tension within the system and delays will result'. For Talabani, however, this is 'merely the sign of a country continuing the difficult transition from oppression to democracy' (Talabani 2010b). In another article, published shortly after the election, Talabani continued this line of thought by claiming that

the post-election coalition building will serve as a critical test of Iraq's fragile democracy and will continue to affect more than just the country's political future ... Iraq can take significant strides towards democratic governance if it adheres to the country's constitution ... What cannot be overlooked is what

the majority of eligible Iraqi voters want their country to be – a stable, prosperous, federal democracy. (Talabani 2010a)

These astute observations proved to be true. On the one hand, the Iraqi people had certainly demonstrated their will towards a democratic future, again risking their lives to vote in Iraq's latest round of elections while on the other hand the obstinacy and incompetence of many of their elected representatives failed to encourage the mutually beneficial dialogue and debate critical to democracy. This saw the nation plummet into nine months of political stalemate. Inevitably, the Iraqi media became very critical of the impasse and of Maliki in particular, urging the various political entities to put their differences aside and make progress (*Aswat Al-Iraq* 2010a). To this end the *PUK Media* published an editorial by Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid in which he offered the following scathing critique of the incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister,

We do not understand what has afflicted Al-Maliki to cause him to raise all of these obstacles, especially as there is no clear victor that would be able to form a government on their own ... Do not forget that this was an open election that was overseen by bodies that Al-Maliki's government put in place and found acceptable, and th[at] the elections results that did not produce a clear victory was ratified by them. Perhaps a candidate not winning a majority is in the interests of Iraq as this is something that forces the politicians to work together over the next four years as a team and form a government that represents everybody, rather than there being a majority ruler who issues orders. This will be a difficult task for the next Prime Minister of Iraq, but this is a good balance, especially for Iraq at its current stage of political maturation. (Al-Rashid 2010)

It is worth noting how Al-Rashid moves from critiquing Maliki and the political stalemate to arguing that the failure to form a majority government could actually serve to improve Iraqi democracy. Other Iraqi commentators have also argued along these lines, suggesting models by which the impasse might be resolved. A particularly popular option of this period was for Iyad Allawi to form a strong opposition party (Amin 2010). Despite such suggestions for the resolution of Iraq's political stalemate, the deadlock continued until early November when an

agreement was signed that confirmed Maliki as Prime Minister and paved the way for the formation of a government (Ottaway and Kaysi 2010). The Iraqi press reacted immediately. Sadiq Hussein Al-Rikabi in the independent *Al-Akhbaar* ('God is Great') was grateful that Iraq finally had a government, 'The whole world was watching a unique democratic experiment ... most Iraqis see it as a nice dream that at long last could usher in an era of stability, prosperity and reconstruction' (Al-Rikabi 2010). On the other hand, authors such as Mahdi Qassim of *Sot Al-Iraq* were not nearly as optimistic:

We are going to have a surreal government, with two leaders who are all too eager to lock horns with each other ... As usual, the victims of this anticipated ram fight are, of course, going to be ordinary, vulnerable and harmless Iraqis ... So congratulations to the people of Iraq on another four bleak years.  
(Qassim 2010)

### **Civil Rights and Protest Movements**

Paralleling this series of free and fair elections and their coverage in the Iraqi press, the Iraqi people frequently exercised their democratic right to protest. Such protests date back to the earliest days of the occupation and were first sparked by American plans to install a puppet government in Baghdad and disavowing the result of grass roots Iraqi elections (Isakhan 2011a). In April 2003, immediately after the fall of Baghdad, Iraq witnessed a series of spontaneous elections not dissimilar to those that followed the end of the First World War. In northern Kurdish cities such as Mosul, in majority Sunni Arab towns like Samarra, in prominent Shia Arab cities such as Hilla and Najaf, and in the capital, Baghdad, religious leaders, tribal elders and secular professionals called town hall meetings where representatives were elected and plans were laid for local reconstruction projects, security operations and the return of basic infrastructure. These initiatives were initially supported by the occupying forces and there are records of US troops playing a facilitating role in the process (N. Klein 2007: 362).

Much like the Colonial period under British occupation, however, the US was quick to quell these Iraqi-led drives towards democratization and to exert its own hegemony over Iraq.

Fearing that the Iraqi people would elect certain ‘undesirables’ such as military strongmen or political Islamists, Bremer instead decided that he would appoint the members of the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG). Consequently, by the end of June, he had ordered that all local and regional elections be stopped immediately (N. Klein 2007: 363–5). This effectively meant that any decisions made by local councils were revoked and the mayors and governors who had been elected by their own constituents were replaced by hand-picked representatives including former Baathists (Booth 2003, Booth and Chandrasekaran 2003).

Such moves were widely unpopular across Iraq. In the Shia holy city of Najaf, hundreds of peaceful protestors took to the streets demanding that their installed mayor be removed and replaced by an elected representative. Several protestors carried placards reading ‘Cancelled elections are evidence of bad intentions’ and ‘O America, where are promises of freedom, elections and democracy?’ (cited in Booth and Chandrasekaran 2003). Much larger demonstrations were conducted in Baghdad and Basra where thousands banded together to chant the words, ‘Yes, yes, elections. No, no selections’ (cited in Hendawi 2003).

These early protests were but a precursor to a movement – particularly among the Shia Arab population of Iraq – that gathered enormous momentum over the ensuing months. Senior religious figures such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani<sup>4</sup> were able to mobilize thousands of Iraqis in protests that called for a general election prior to the drafting of the Iraqi constitution. Al-Sistani, a member of the quietist branch of the Shia faith took the unprecedented step of issuing a politically-motivated *fatwa* (edict) in June 2003 which argued that the US lacked the appropriate authority to install a government in Iraq and demanded that they hold national elections so that the Iraqi people could nominate their own representatives. The *fatwa* read:

Those [US] forces have no jurisdiction whatsoever to appoint members of the Constitution preparation assembly. Also there is no guarantee either that this assembly will prepare a constitution that serves the best interests of the Iraqi

---

<sup>4</sup> The Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, is the pre-eminent Shia cleric or *marja* in Iraq and has been since 1992.

people or express their national identity whose backbone is sound Islamic religion and noble social values. The said plan is unacceptable from the outset. First of all there must be a general election so that every Iraqi citizen who is eligible to vote can choose someone to represent him in a foundational Constitution preparation assembly. Then the drafted Constitution can be put to a referendum. All believers must insist on the accomplishment of this crucial matter and contribute to achieving it in the best way possible. (Al-Sistani cited in Feldman 2005: 6)

Although the Coalition Provisional Authority at first underestimated the importance of such a *fatwa*, it ultimately had a profound effect on US plans for post-Saddam Iraq, as they were now forced to appease Sistani's demands. The US put in place an unelected transitional assembly with no guarantee of lasting power in Iraq and no power to write the constitution. Instead, the assembly would pave the way for national elections in January 2005 which would in turn see an elected body responsible for drafting the Iraqi constitution. Although this was a significant compromise for the world's last remaining superpower to make to a religious figure in Najaf, it was not enough for Sistani who demanded that the US seek UN approval for their plan. Incredibly, even though the entire world – including pleas from America's closest ally, the UK – had been unable to bring the US before the United Nations, Sistani succeeded (Feldman 2005: 7–8).

This was still not enough for Sistani, however, who wanted guarantees that the US would not further delay or manipulate Iraqi democracy. To bolster his argument and demonstrate its popularity among the Iraqi Shia majority, in mid-January 2004 the cleric called for the faithful to protest. More than 100,000 Shia marched through Baghdad while a further 30,000 took to the streets of Basra to demand democracy (Walker 2005). They called on the US occupation forces to conduct free and fair national elections that would enable the people of Iraq to nominate an Iraqi legislature. They waved flags and chanted, 'Yes, yes to unification! Yes, yes to voting! Yes, yes to elections! No, no to occupation!' (cited in Jamail 2004). Some carried banners with slogans such as 'We refuse any constitution that is not elected by the Iraqi people', while one

protestor told reporters that ‘If America won’t give us the democracy they promised, we will make it for ourselves’ (cited in Jamail 2004). Demonstrating the power of the cleric these protests remained peaceful according to his instructions and when he announced that he had agreed to wait for a UN Fact-finding Team to study the situation, the protestors disbanded as quickly as they had assembled (Finn 2004).

Sistani’s pro-democracy campaign continued in the lead up to the January 2005 elections for a transitional government. This time, Sistani issued another series of politically-motivated *fatwas* urging his clergymen to get involved in local politics and encouraging the faithful, including women, to protest key decisions and vote in elections (Al-Rahim 2005: 50). Sistani also played a critical role in uniting the divergent political factions of the Iraqi Shia population – including Sadr, ISCI and Dawah – under the banner of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Reasoning that a greater involvement of the Shia Arab majority in Iraqi politics would rectify the power imbalance that had swung in favour of the Sunni Arab minority since the inception of the state in 1921, Sistani understood that bringing the varying Shia factions together would enable them to wield significant power (Duss and Juul 2009: 11).

Paralleling the pro-democracy movements of Al-Sistani were those of the younger, more radical, Moqtada Al-Sadr<sup>5</sup> who was to gain both notoriety and political influence following the invasion. Arguably this began when the CPA forced the closure of two newspapers produced by Al-Sadr, prompting thousands of protestors to gather at the paper’s office in central Baghdad. The protestors chanted slogans such as ‘No, no, America!’ and ‘Where is democracy now?’, and vowed to avenge *Al-Hawza*’s closure (Al-Shaykh 2004, Gettleman 2004). In an ironic twist, it was the forced closure of *Al-Hawza*, rather than anything printed across its pages, which ultimately garnered a renewed reverence for Al-Sadr among his followers and arguably incited his *Mahdi Army* to violence (Al-Marashi 2007: 132).

---

<sup>5</sup> Moqtada Al-Sadr has no formal religious training, his popularity comes from the fact that he is the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohamad Sadiq Al-Sadr, who was assassinated by the Baath in 1999.

Throughout 2004 Al-Sadr led several military uprisings against the occupation forces and Sunni insurgents. His fire-brand rhetoric and military action quickly earned him immense popularity among the poor, the dispossessed and the devout Shia underclasses, particularly in Baghdad. They helped refine his mastery of anti-occupation political rhetoric and distinguished him against Al-Sistani as a strong militant religious leader who had both the strength and courage to take on the United States. As Patrick Cockburn puts it Al-Sadr 'is the Messianic leader of the religious and political movement of the impoverished Shia underclass whose lives were ruined by a quarter of a century of war, repression, and sanctions' (Cockburn 2008: 199). When his military campaigns consistently failed, however, Al-Sadr employed a new set of weapons in his struggle against the occupation from 2005 onwards. These included a dramatic shift in approach from armed resistance to (mostly) non-violent political struggle, an evolution in rhetoric that saw him change from fire-brand pro-Shia Islamism to one who called for tolerance, national unity and social inclusion, and the effective transformation of the *Mahdi Army* from a militia to a social welfare organization (Yaphe 2008: 3). In Sadr city, the political arm of his organization, the Sadr Trend (or Sadrist Movement), began to organize their own religious courts, conduct law enforcement operations, set up prisons and initiate a range of social services including the supply of potable water, health care and food distribution.

As part of this shift, Al-Sadr, following in the footsteps of Al-Sistani, began to capitalize on his enormous support base, which he regularly mobilized in co-ordinated protests across Iraq. On the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq (April 2005), Al-Sadr orchestrated massive protests in Baghdad. His supporters marched the five kilometres from Sadr city to Firdos square where, in 2003, the US had torn down the giant bronze statue of Saddam in an attempt to look like the liberators and not the invaders of Iraq. Thousands travelled from all over the nation to attend these peaceful protests making them one of the largest political rallies in Iraqi history (Jasim 2005). They chanted anti-occupation slogans while a statement read on behalf of Al-Sadr claimed, 'We want a stable Iraq and this will only happen through

independence ... There will be no security and stability unless the occupiers leave ... The occupiers must leave my country' (cited in Al-Khairalla 2005b).

Of particular interest was Al-Sadr orders to his followers to wave only Iraqi flags and not those of the *Mahdi Army* or other Shia Arab organizations. This was a clear attempt to move the protests beyond a pro-Al-Sadr, Shia-backed movement to more of a nationalist struggle against occupation – something which would appeal to Iraqis of all persuasions. Consequently a number of Sunni Arabs and a small contingent of Iraqi Christians also attended the Baghdad protests. In the Sunni city of Ramadi the Association of Muslim Scholars coordinated concurrent protests attended by around 5,000 protestors (Carl 2005). These massive anti-occupation protests, organized by Al-Sadr, have become an ongoing annual event in Iraq with successful and largely peaceful demonstrations being conducted each year since 2005. Al-Sadr's followers have also organized several other demonstrations concerning more pragmatic problems: in the Sunni-dominated city of Samarra hundreds of Al-Sadr's followers have repeatedly demonstrated against the lack of basic infrastructure and public services such as electricity, fuel, potable water, the high cost of ice and the increasingly bleak employment market.

As well as these protests, Al-Sadr has further demonstrated his keen political instincts and acute knowledge of democratic mechanisms. In 2005, he instructed his followers to collect the signatures of one million Iraqis in a petition that asked the US and Coalition troops to leave the country immediately. This continued in March 2008 when Al-Sadr launched a nation-wide civil disobedience campaign in response to a series of raids targeting the cleric's offices and the subsequent arrest of a number of members of his organization. In several key Baghdad neighbourhoods, including Mahmoudiya and Yusufiya, members of the *Mahdi Army* marched peacefully, while in Abu Disher the streets were emptied, stores closed and schools vacated in protest (Tawfeeq, Wald, and Sterling 2008). Then in October 2008, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets of Sadr city and in the south-eastern province of Missan in support of Al-Sadr's concerns about the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which had been negotiated by the US

and Iraqi governments in 2008 and which would see the final withdrawal of all US forces by 31 December 2011. When the Iraqi Government ignored their protests and signed the deal, Al-Sadr's followers re-appeared in the streets and one of his senior supporters read a message from the cleric stating that,

This crowd shows that the opposition to the agreement is not insignificant and parliament will be making a big mistake if it chooses to ignore it ... The government must know it is the people who help it in the good and the bad times. If it throws the occupier out, we will stand by it. (cited in Chulov 2008).

More recently, in early 2011, Al-Sadr spoke at a number of politico-religious rallies coordinated by his followers and attended by thousands of Iraqis (*Al-Jazeera* 2011a, Shadid 2011). In a style that has become the hallmark of Al-Sadr's campaign, he called on the crowd to resist US occupation 'through armed, cultural and all kinds of resistance', chanting slogans such as 'no, no to occupiers' (Al-Sadr cited in *Al-Jazeera* 2011b). At the same time, however, he also called for peace and unity between Iraqis and, referring to the brutal civil war of earlier years, pleaded with his followers: 'Whatever happened between brothers happened, but that page must be forgotten and turned forever' (Al-Sadr cited in Muir 2011).

The key reason the Shia Arab protests have been so effective is that they make up the majority of Iraq's population whereas the Sunni Arabs (around 20%), the Kurds (around 20%) and the Iraqi Christians (around 3%) simply cannot command such impressively large demonstrations. Nonetheless, these smaller minorities have also been able to utilize the power of the streets in order to air their concerns and advocate political change. The Sunni Arab minority conducted some of their earliest protests in the form of general strikes in resistance to US blockades of Sunni cities. In Ramadi the entire town shut down for two days as US troops launched a major offensive across the Sunni region. As Sheikh Majeed Al-Gaood described it, 'a call came from the mosques for a general strike in Ramadi and neighboring towns. Schools, markets and offices shut down in protest at the blockade' (Al-Gaood cited in Assaf 2005). The

Sunni Arab protests were to gather increased momentum as the former ruling minority found itself increasingly ostracized by the Shia Arab and Kurdish dominated central government. In 2005, Sunni Arab demonstrations were held in the towns of Hit, Ramadi, Samarra and Mosul to protest the US and Iraqi Government plan for a nation-wide referendum in October 2005 that was designed to ratify the Iraqi constitution drawn up by the government. The Sunnis felt that they had had little say in the creation of the constitution and took to the streets *en masse* to air their concerns (Nasr 2005). In northern cities such as Kirkuk and Mosul the Sunni Arabs have frequently taken to the streets in protests against what they see as the Kurdish domination of Nineveh's regional administration (Nourredin 2005). In 2008 the Sunni Arab population of the Baghdad suburb of Adhamiyah protested against moves by the Kurds to incorporate the oil province of Kirkuk into the autonomous Kurdish region (*Agence France Presse* 2008).

At around the same time, the Kurds were also conducting their own protests regarding Kirkuk. Thousands gathered in cities such as Sulaymanyah, Arbil, Kirkuk and Dohuk after the Iraqi Parliament passed a law that would see a power-sharing arrangement devised for Kurdistan's multi-ethnic cities. In both Sulamanyah and Dohuk, the protestors submitted a warrant of protest to the UN Secretary General, the Iraqi President, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Parliament, asking the law to be revoked (*Voices of Iraq* 2008b, 2008c). The Kurds have also rallied against the inequities they see across their own region. During both March and August of 2006, and more recently in August of 2008, a series of largely peaceful demonstrations broke into angry protest against the KRG and its failure to provide basic public services to the region (Hama-Saeed 2007, Ridolfo 2006).

Caught in the political and sectarian cross-fire of post-Saddam Iraq, smaller ethno-religious minorities, such as the Turkomen, the Faili Kurds (Shiite Kurds) and the Christian minority of Iraq (made up mostly of Syriac-speaking Assyrians and Chaldeans) are often forgotten alongside the three larger ethno-sectarian groups. Unfortunately, these small Iraqi minorities have been the victims of much violence and harassment with many having left the country in fear of their lives. They have nonetheless been politically active with some minor

successes such as their inclusion in various political coalitions, the creation of a small number of media outlets and a handful of political protests staged since 2003. In 2008, hundreds of Iraqi Christians demonstrated across key towns in northern Iraq including Qosh, Karabakh, Tell-esqope and Dohuk. The protesters chanted slogans and carried banners expressing their indignation at being denied the chance to elect their own representatives in the provinces in which they lived. They also called for autonomy in their ancestral homeland. The President of the Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Council, Jameel Zito, spoke to the crowds stating, 'Our rights to elect our own representation has been denied therefore we demand our right to self-government, because this is the only way to ensure our rights in our homeland' (Zito cited in Hakim 2008).

However, not all of the protests of post-Saddam Iraq have been conducted along ethno-religious lines. Iraq has also seen a variety of civil movements emerge that are not so much concerned with issues regarding ethno-religious rights, resistance to the occupation or a rejection of state policy, but rather the plight of normal Iraqi citizens – ordinary people who demand better working conditions, higher salaries, safer environs and better infrastructure. While many of these protests have occurred in very specific ethno-religious areas and are at times made up entirely of one particular ethno-religious group, the main impetus of these protests is the people's struggle for a more inclusive and equitable future. The Iraqi people have repeatedly protested against corruption and nepotism in their local and national governments and called for the resignation of several senior officials (*Al-Jazeera* 2008, *Voices of Iraq* 2008a).

Women's rights have also become a particular concern in post-Saddam Iraq with Iraqi women of all ethnicities and religious persuasions initiating their own powerful protest campaigns since the 2003 US invasion. Several women's rights and social justice activists have joined forces in a group known as 'Women's Will' that has organized a boycott of the US goods which have flooded the Iraqi market since the invasion. One of the leaders of the group is reported to have argued:

We are now living under another dictatorship, you see what kind of democracy we have, seems more like bloodocracy. You see what kind of

liberation they brought: unemployment, murder and destruction. We must resist this, it is the right of any occupied people to resist. Especially the women, we can use the simplest weapons of resistance, a financial boycott.  
(cited in Carr 2005)

Similarly, June 2005 saw massive protests organized by various Islamic human rights and women's rights organizations in Mosul which pressed for the immediate release of all Iraqi women in US custody. So effective was this campaign that the US was forced to release 21 Iraqi women in Mosul who had been held as a bargaining chip against relatives suspected of resistance against US forces (Al-Din and El-Yassari 2005). Both during and after the 2010 elections, women's rights became a major issue when several women's groups highlighted the various challenges women face, especially in terms of safety, and their gross underrepresentation in Iraqi politics (*Aswat Al-Iraq* 2010b, 2010d, 2010g).

As well as protests against corruption, nepotism and women's rights, in recent years, Iraq has also seen a collection of powerful workers' movements emerge. Iraqi doctors, nurses, taxi drivers, university staff, police, customs officers and emergency service personnel have repeatedly used non-violent protests, strikes, sit-ins and walk-outs. They have done so 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 (Al-Dulaimy and Allam 2005, Al-Khairalla 2005a, Assaf 2005, Hassan 2005).

Perhaps the best examples of civil protest in Iraq have been those coordinated by the nation's largest and most powerful independent union, the General Union of Oil Employees (later renamed the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions [IFOU]). The union is led by President Hassan Jumaa Awwad Al-Asady and has over 26,000 members. The IFOU really began to flex its political muscles in May 2005 when it held a conference against the privatization of Iraq's oil industry. Aiming directly at certain Iraqi politicians complicit in US plans to privatize Iraqi oil, the conference called upon 'members of Parliament ... to take a firm stand against political

currents and directives calling for the privatization of the public sector in Iraq' (cited in *Uruknet* 2005). In June 2005, some 15,000 workers conducted a peaceful 24 hour strike, cutting most oil exports from the south of Iraq. This particular strike was 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 region's deplorable infrastructure. At the time, Al-Waili was 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 cited in *Global Resistance News* 2005). The IFOU also demanded the removal of 15 high ranking Baath loyalists in the Ministry of Oil as well as a salary increase for the workers (*BBC* 2005).

Two years later, in May 2007, the IFOU threatened to strike again, but this was delayed when a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki resulted in the formation of a committee tasked with working on finding solutions acceptable to both sides. When the government failed to deliver on any of its promises, however, the oil workers 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. A few days later, the Iraqi government responded by issuing arrest warrants for leaders of IFOU including Awwad 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. In the face of such intimidation the union held firm, taking the bold step of closing the main distribution pipelines, including supplies to Baghdad. After several days of meetings and much political deliberation, Awwad 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' (Awwad 2007).

Throughout 2010 and into 2011 all of these divergent aspects of Iraq's various protest movements have converged. Religious figures, political parties, women's groups and civil rights movements have banded together in a series of protests that have been a great demonstration of

the Iraqi people's understanding of the mechanisms of democracy. 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. Several protests and sit-ins erupted across Iraq, the largest and longest of which were held at Nasiriyah and Basra. These protests prompted Nuri Al-Maliki to send a delegation to Basra in order to look into the problem, but he remained adamant that electricity officials should be the ones held accountable for the shortages, leading Iraq's electricity minister, Kareem Waheed, to offer his resignation (Alwan and Fadel 2010, Fadel 2010). Aside from electricity and water issues underpinning these protests was a broad sense of dissatisfaction with the ongoing political stalemate, now well into its third month. As Iraq's foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, put it 'People are tired of a lack of services, lack of action, and all this debate on television about government formation and positions. The public sense is one of anger and tiredness' (Zebari cited in *Al-Jazeera* 2010).

However, no one could have predicted the dramatic sequence of events that would sweep across the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 and through 2011 as long lasting and deeply entrenched regimes fell in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (Isakhan, et al. 2012). Civil movements gained credible if faltering momentum across the region and Iraqis were confronted with the failures of their own democracy to deliver on the many promises made to them since 2003. This led to weeks of scattered protests across Iraq. As with the other protests across the Middle East, organizers used Facebook and other social media and new technologies to promote the rallies, disseminate opinion and stimulate debate. What differentiated them from protests elsewhere was the fact that, while other Middle Eastern protestors focused on overthrowing governments, the protests in Iraq mostly addressed issues such as corruption, the country's chronic unemployment and shoddy public services like electricity, and included calls for the resignation of provincial governors (Sly 2011).

These events culminated 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 (*Al-Jazeera* 2011c, 2011d). In smaller regions such as the southern province of Thi-Qar, 10,000 demonstrators gathered with one claiming that such protests ‘proved that there is a new factor affecting the state’s policy which is the citizen, who managed to demand his rights ... [constituting] a real challenge for democracy’ (Al-Jaberi cited in *Aswat Al-Iraq* 2011). Similarly, across the north, tens of thousands of Kurds mimicked protestors in Cairo and elsewhere by setting up camp for days on end in central squares, including *Al-Saray* square in Sulaimaniya (Al-Khateeb 2011). Muhammed Tawfeek, a spokesman for *Gorran*, the Kurdish opposition party, claimed that ‘People here are as frustrated as the rest of the Middle East ... It’s all about democracy, separation of power and clean elections’ (Tawfeek cited in Arango and Schmidt 2011). Meanwhile, in Baghdad’s own *Tahrir* (liberation) square 5,000 protestors carrying Iraqi flags and various political banners gathered, chanting ‘No to unemployment. No to the liar Maliki’ (cited in *Al-Jazeera* 2011f). Reporting from Baghdad, *Al-Jazeera*’s Jane Arraf gave the following description of events:

The protests in Iraq are growing in size, partly because of the instability of the coalition government formed by Nouri Al-Maliki, the country’s prime minister ... Iraqis are increasingly unwilling to accept the nature of the democracy that has emerged in years after Saddam’s regime was overthrown ... This is a new democracy, it’s an unusual democracy, and it’s not exactly what people bargained for ... On top of that, people are looking around [at] protests in Egypt and Tunisia ... It has shown them, particularly these young people that if they come out and demand their rights, perhaps something will happen. (Arraf cited in *Al-Jazeera* 2011e)

Unfortunately, key Iraqi political figures such as Maliki and Barzani reacted to these events in ways similar to dictators and autocrats across the region: they met Iraqi protests with a mixture of brutal suppression and modest political and economic concessions. For his part, Maliki offered concessions such as promising to cut his pay in half and to amend the Iraqi constitution so that no leader could serve more than two terms (Sly 2011). In terms of suppression, Maliki ordered the closure of the offices and newspapers of the Iraqi Nation Party and the Iraqi

Communist Party, both of which had been critical in organizing the protests (Schmidt and Healy 2011). Maliki also ordered a brutal crackdown on the Iraqi protestors, journalists, and civil and political activists who have been involved in the events. The ISF and the protestors clashed frequently, leading to many arrests, beatings and deaths. In the Kurdish north, Barzani employed a similar strategy, sending in a thousand of his *Peshmerga* militia to quell demonstrations that demanded his departure (Al-Khateeb 2011, Al-Laithi 2011).

While such developments do not bode well for Iraqi democracy, the protests of the Re-Colonial period nonetheless indicate the continuing struggle of the Iraqi people towards democracy and also shed light on the complex nature of politics post-Saddam. Commenting on these events, one anonymous editorial printed in *Azzaman* at the time of the ‘Day of Rage’ protests captures this complexity:

Iraqis are supposed to have been ‘liberated’ by their U.S. occupiers. They are supposed to be enjoying the fruits of their occupation by the world’s most powerful nation. They are supposed to have democracy, unlike other Arab countries whose nations are rising against their dictators. The U.S., childishly, thought it could bring democracy to Iraq ... It thought it could bring its own lackeys and install them as satraps to rule the country democratically. And today, the lackeys it brought with its invasion, who are ruling the country, including its semi-independent Kurdish north, find that their own people are rising against them the way the people of Libya and other Arab countries are revolting against their dictators ... Iraqis, who think of themselves as the real revolutionaries of the Arab world, are embarrassed and ashamed. They wanted to have the change on their own, the way the Egyptians toppled Mubarak’s presidency ... How glad we the Iraqis would have been if we today, like other Arabs, rose against our dictator and had him toppled. We need to remove this stigma of shame by overthrowing the lackeys the U.S. brought with it and installed over us, whether in the Kurdish north or the Arab centre and south.

(*Azzaman* 2011)

## **Conclusion**

A close inspection of the Re-Colonial period, therefore reveals an unrivalled upsurge in media freedoms that have played a central role in promoting a succession of Iraqi elections and referendums since 2005. Similarly, the many protest movements that have spread across Iraq in the Re-Colonial period have allowed ordinary people to express their concerns or air their grievances in a relatively peaceful and democratic way. These indigenous, localized and highly co-ordinated media and protest movements reveal the strength of the Iraqi people's will towards democracy and that, when given the opportunity to make this will a reality, they are more than capable of utilizing democratic mechanisms independent of foreign interference. They also indicate the degree to which democratic practices and culture are familiar to the people of Iraq. The Iraqi people implicitly understand that by critiquing their government in the press or by taking to the streets to protest key decisions, they are able to hold their democratically elected representatives to account. The fact that Iraqi citizens of all ethno-religious persuasions and professions have actively utilized the mechanisms of democratic deliberation to effectively voice their concerns and influence politics is at odds with the prevailing western view that the streets of Iraq are the locus solely of spontaneous acts of violence.

The Re-Colonial period also contradicts the view that the West has a unique proclivity for democracy and the Iraqi people have been able to successfully expose the fallacy of the US's self-appointed mission to bring democracy to the Middle East. The argument can be made that whatever its shortcomings, democracy exists in Iraq today because Iraqis demanded it, not because US idealists imposed it. Together, the actions of both the US and the Iraqi people during the recent past assert an alternative history of Iraq, an alternative history that is written each day by the many Iraqis who are deeply concerned with the future of their nation.