
IRAQ ELECTIONS: THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE COMMUNIST-SADRIST ALLIANCE

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The coalitions have formed for Iraq's parliamentary elections, scheduled for May. While parties and coalitions based on ethnic and sectarian identities are prevalent in the race, at the same time, formerly sectarian parties have reinvented themselves as national movements.

The Sadrists, followers of Shia religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, have formed a joint list with the Iraqi Communist Party, ostensibly an anomalous occurrence of Islamists uniting with an established secular party.

However, an examination of Iraq's history indicates that an alliance between secularists and those with religious backgrounds does have a precedent. The Sadrist-Communist alliance appears to be a reversion to older patterns in Iraq's political history based on civic and national issues, and a repudiation of the sectarian politics that took root after 2003.

Past precedents

Iraqi communists were active in Iraq during the state's formation in the 1920s, just a few years after the Bolshevik seizure of power in the USSR. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was formally founded in 1934, and its numbers expanded under the leadership of Yusuf Salman Yusuf, or "Comrade Fahad", who upon assuming leadership of the Party in 1941, recruited from urban elites to peasants, workers and students.

Faris Kamal Nadhmi, a leftist Iraqi intellectual, wrote an article as early as 2010 predicting a future Sadrist-Communist alliance. His foresight was based on past precedents, writing that in the 1950s the ICP cooperated with religious Shia movements in the traditional shrine cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Kadhimiyya.

At the outset, it appears incongruous that a religious movement and a secular party would find common cause

Both the ICP and Shia activists agitated against the Iraqi monarchy, which was overthrown in 1958.

After the establishment of Iraq's republic, however, tensions emerged. The Shia Islamic Dawa Party was formed to promote religious ideals to counter the ICP, which had recruited heavily amongst Iraq's Shia.

A prominent Shia cleric at the time, Muhsin al-Hakim, had even issued a religious decree labelling membership in the ICP as blasphemy, yet he was also wary of the Dawa Party as well. Regardless, both the ICP and the Dawa were ruthlessly suppressed when the Baath seized power in 1968, seeing both as challengers to its one-party rule.

Only after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 could both the ICP and Dawa reemerge openly in Iraq's political landscape

The Sadrist Transformation

While Dawa had a long history of Shia political activism, it was challenged by the rise of Muqtada Sadr to political prominence, which was not a given in post-2003 Iraq. As a young religious leader then in his late 20s, his only real asset was the legacy of his father, Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq Sadr, a prominent religious figure opposed to Saddam Hussein, and murdered in 1999 by Iraqi intelligence agents.

Muqtada inherited a network that his father had developed among Iraq's urban Shia poor, concentrated in Baghdad's slum, which was rebranded as Sadr City.

Sadr in his early years raised a militia, the Al-Mahdi Army, which clashed with US forces and the Iraqi military on numerous occasions, and factions within the militia were implicated in some of the worst sectarian killings from 2006 to 2008.

Eventually, Sadr disbanded his militia, attempting to disavow himself of its violence, and in early 2016 saw an opportunity to seize the helm of an anti-government protest movement in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, which had emerged to pressure Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to deliver on anti-corruption reforms.

In this new political incarnation he embraced the politics of protest and formed an alliance the Iraqi CP and other secular groups that had been instrumental in organising the rallies.

The common ground

The protest movement was the first major alliance between a major Shia Muslim political movement and a secular one. In June the Sadrists and the Communists agreed to run a joint ticket in the 2018 elections, a forward-thinking move in contrast to the other ad-hoc and fractious coalitions that emerged just before the January 2018 deadline to register for the elections.

Sadr declared the creation of a new political party, Istiqama, or Integrity, and joined in a coalition with the ICP and several over secular parties to create the Marching Toward Reform coalition, adopting the slogan of the anti-corruption street protests.

The Sadrist-Communist alliance represents another fissure within the greater Muslim Shi'a alliance

At the outset, it appears incongruous that a religious movement and a secular party would find common cause. Indeed, some secular politicians refused to join this coalition, believing it is impossible for a religious and secular group to cooperate.

However, there is some common ground. Both movements claim to represent the marginalised, deprived, dispossessed and oppressed. Both base their legitimacy on combatting injustice and social inequality.

Al-Sadr's following amongst the poor Shia Muslims of Baghdad and the southern provinces could mobilise followers that the ICP has not been able to reach.

Even seasoned observers of Iraqi politics are uncertain how many votes the Marching Toward Reform coalition will get, given the elections are still a few months away in May. They are also running against a new political actor, the Iraqi Shia militia party, and it is uncertain how their popularity amongst the Shia for defeating Islamic State (IS) will translate into votes.

However, based on the past election of 2014 the Muslim Shia parties combined won 178 out of 328 seats, 34 of which belonged to the Sadrist party. The Communists, running under the Civil Democratic Alliance, won three seats in 2014.

Abandoning sectarian affiliation

Thus, an alliance with the Communists, based on past precedents, does not seem to indicate that it would give the Sadrists a qualitative edge. In fact the Sadrists may lose some among religious voters for allying with a secular party.

However, the loss may be offset by the symbolic value of the Sadrists abandoning their sectarian affiliation and allowing it to brandish their nationalist credentials, appeal to secular Iraqi voters.

Iraq elections: A very divided political landscape

Even though the Iraqi Shia are the majority in the country, they do not necessarily always vote on sectarian lines and have given support to Shia candidates, like Ayad Allawi in 2010, who ran on a nationalist platform.

Ultimately, the Sadrist-Communist alliance represents another fissure within the greater Muslim Shia alliance. Even if all the other rival Shia Muslim parties agree to form a governing coalition alliance after the elections, al-Sadr's factions would deprive the other Shia parties of an outright majority.

The Sadrist-Communist alliance might end up as the king-maker of a new Iraqi government, and thus also once again give Iraqi Communists the opportunity to assume ministerial posts in a new cabinet.

Regardless of the number of votes this Sadrist-Communist coalition receives, the alliance itself is significant in that it demonstrates the fusion of a civil-national movement with a religious one that seeks to transcend the boundaries of sect and ethnic group, and in the words of Faris Kamal Nadhmi, "moving towards the horizon of the state, the nation, and humanity."

Kaynak/Source: