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## The Illusion of Victory and the Reproduction of Political Failure in Iraq

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● **Opinion Article**

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## **Introduction: The Illusion of Victory and the Problem of Perception**

Since 2003, the political crises in Iraq have not merely been crises of the transfer of power, but also a crisis of political perception regarding the nature of the state, its function, and the limits of power within it. Iraqi political forces, with their various orientations, have treated every electoral process or governmental agreement as a moment of final victory, rather than a temporary stage within a fragile and complex political system where domestic and foreign interests, identities, and balances intersect. From here, one of the most dangerous phenomena in the modern Iraqi experience was formed, namely: “the illusion of victory”.

The illusion of victory is not confined to being a psychological feeling or a media discourse; rather, it has transformed into a mechanism for managing political action; for every bloc that believes it has achieved an electoral or negotiating victory behaves as though it is the sole representative of legitimacy, and seeks to reshape the political process according to a mentality of acquisition rather than a mentality of management and balance. Conversely, this very victory transforms into an entry point for producing a new crisis more complex than its

predecessor.

In the specific case of Iraq, the feeling of political forces that they have achieved an electoral or negotiating victory often drives them to commit a series of structural errors that practically lead to weakening both the government and the state, at the very time they think they are reinforcing their power and influence. Since the 2018 elections, passing through the 2021 elections and the subsequent phase of political deadlock, up to the reshaping of alliances that culminated in the designation and formation of the government on May 14, 2026, Iraqi political forces have reproduced the exact same pattern: declaring victory, expanding influence, monopolizing decision-making, and then colliding with the structural reality of the crisis-ridden political system. It is as if the Iraqi political system lives within a recurring cycle of “short victories” and “long failures”.

The fundamental problem lies not in the election results themselves, but in how those results are understood and translated politically. In stable systems, elections represent a tool for redistributing power within established institutional rules, and political victory is supposed to lead to increased responsibility, openness to society, and the rebuilding of

public trust. In Iraq, however, elections have turned into an existential battle that produces a sense of dominance for the winner and a sense of existential exclusion for the loser, making every political process a prelude to a subsequent crisis. Hence, political victory is often translated into behavior contrary to the logic of the state, as it leads to expanding control, narrowing partnership, and dealing with the state as the temporary political property of the winner, and here the real crisis begins.

Accordingly, this article attempts to analyze the concept of the “illusion of victory” in the Iraqi case, and how it has contributed to reproducing political failure, by tracking the patterns of political behavior of influential forces, analyzing the relationship between elections, power, and the state, and understanding how Iraqi democracy was transformed from a mechanism for political competition into a tool for recycling the crisis.

### **First: Victory as an Alternative to the State**

The Iraqi political system suffers from a deep crisis in understanding the modern state; for instead of viewing the state as a supreme, neutral institution that organizes public interests, it has been treated as political spoils subject to

distribution and acquisition; hence, victory has come to mean controlling the joints of the state, rather than developing or reforming it.

After 2003, the political system was established on the equation of sectarian, ethnic, and partisan balances, rather than on the basis of building a state of institutions. Instead of producing the concept of political citizenship, sub-identities were reproduced as tools to reach power. Over time, electoral victory came to mean “possessing the right to hegemony,” rather than merely obtaining a temporary mandate for management.

This understanding led to the emergence of a dangerous phenomenon manifested in turning elections into a zero-sum conflict, as each political party treats victory as an opportunity to exclude others, or at least to downsize their role and reduce their influence. Therefore, elections do not end by producing political stability; rather, a new phase of conflict begins afterwards over interpreting a fundamental question: Who actually won? In this context, the Iraqi state no longer represents an inclusive public space; rather, it has turned into an arena of contention among political forces that see themselves as the legitimate winner, and seek to entrench this victory by controlling security, economic, administrative,

and media institutions.

## **Second: The 2018 Elections and the Beginning of the Illusion of Symbolic Majority**

The 2018 elections constituted an important turning point in the structure of the Iraqi political conflict, coming after the military victory over the ISIS organization and amidst the escalation of the “victorious state” discourse. Many political forces tried to exploit this climate to re-legitimize themselves popularly and politically. The winning forces at the time dealt with the results as a mandate to redraw the political map, yet reality quickly revealed that electoral victory does not necessarily mean the ability to manage the state.

For the government that was formed entered, within a short period, into complex crises related to services, the economy, corruption, and unemployment, leading up to the explosion of the Tishreen (October) protests in 2019. The Tishreen protests revealed one of the most important realities of the Iraqi political system, which is that political elites were living inside an “illusory bubble of victory,” detached from deep social transformations within Iraqi society. While the parties were talking about stability and political victory, the street

was experiencing a state of comprehensive collapse of trust in both the state and the political system.

Here, the great contradiction emerged: How can forces that view themselves as victorious face the largest crisis of popular legitimacy since 2003? The answer lies in the fact that victory in Iraq was not based on institutional achievement or societal satisfaction, but rather on the ability to maneuver within the political system itself; that is, the political elites were defeating one another, but they were gradually losing the state and society.

### **Third: The 2021 Elections: Victory as a Project of Exclusion**

The 2021 elections produced one of the most tense political moments in Iraq, as the winning movement at the time dealt with the results as a mandate to establish a “political majority” that would end the phase of traditional consensus; conversely, the relatively losing forces saw what happened as an existential threat to their position within the system. Thus, Iraq entered a phase of political deadlock that lasted for long months, clearly reflecting the crisis of understanding democracy within the Iraqi political system; instead of accepting the idea of a flexible transfer of power, elections were turned into a battle of broken wills.

The problem was not the idea of a majority in itself, but rather the fragile Iraqi context; for a majority in stable systems is built on strong institutions, firmly established constitutional rules, and mutual trust among political actors. In Iraq, however, where the state is weak, trust is nonexistent, weapons are present, and divisions are sharp, any attempt to impose a dominant majority quickly turns into a structural crisis.

The political deadlock revealed that all sides were living the illusion of the ability to achieve a final resolution; the winning side believed it was capable of completely bypassing its opponents, while the opposing side believed it was capable of preventing the formation of any political equation of which it was not a central part. The result was the paralysis of the state, the disruption of institutions, the depletion of political legitimacy, and the entrenchment of Iraq's image as a state incapable of managing the transition of power in a stable manner.

#### **Fourth: From Deadlock to the Recycling of Power**

The most important paradox in the Iraqi scene is that major crises do not lead to genuine reviews, but rather to the reproduction of old balances in new formulas; after the political deadlock, the political system was not reformed, the crisis of

legitimacy was not resolved, and the relationship between the state and political forces was not redefined.

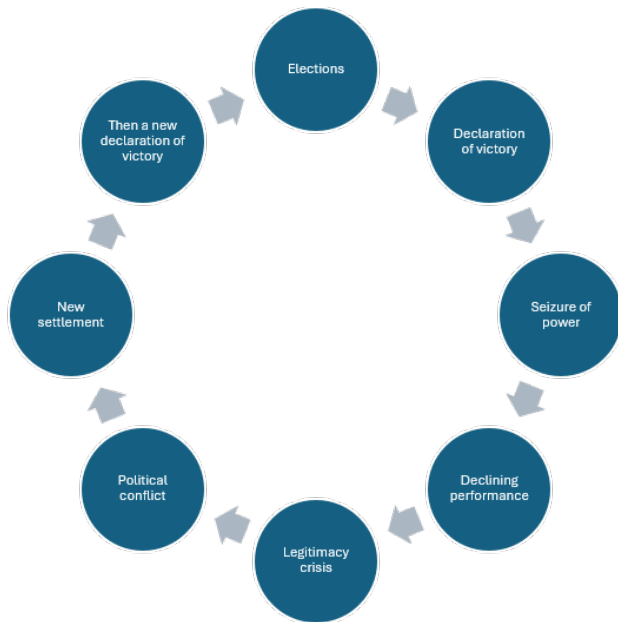
What actually happened was the recycling of power. Here, the “illusion of victory” appears once again, as each party that emerged from the crisis tried to present itself as the political victor, even though everyone had lost a large part of their legitimacy and the public’s trust in them. In Iraq, political compromises are often presented as victories, despite being in reality an expression of a collective inability to achieve resolution, which makes the political system live in a permanent state of “temporary stability” that conceals within it deferred elements of explosion.

### **Fifth: A New Victory or the Reproduction of the Crisis?**

With the formation of the government on May 14, 2026, the discourse of “political victory” returned to the forefront once again. The parties involved in forming the government presented what happened as a success in overcoming previous crises and re-establishing political stability. But the most important question is not: Who formed the government? Rather: Has the nature of the political system itself changed?

So far, the indicators seem closer to reproducing the old

equation; political forces still deal with the state through the logic of quota-sharing (muhasasa) and balances, the concept of “entitlement” is still understood as an authoritarian share rather than a political responsibility, and the political discourse remains governed by the idea of: Who controls? More than: How is the state managed? The most dangerous aspect of the illusion of victory is that it prevents review; for the side that believes it has won does not see the causes of structural failure, but rather interprets every crisis as a conspiracy, obstruction, or poor implementation. Therefore, the same vicious cycle continues:



**Figure: Prepared by the researcher**

## **Sixth: The Illusion of Victory and the Monopolization of the State**

The illusion of victory drives political forces to confuse government with power; when a political force feels that it has achieved a victory, it tends to believe that the government has become an expression of it exclusively, rather than of the state with its various components and interests. As a result, the government transforms from an institution for managing general balances into a tool for entrenching partisan and political influence.

From here, a set of dangerous outcomes emerges, most prominently:

1. Marginalizing political opponents and excluding them from circles of influence.
2. Monopolizing decision-making within narrow and closed circles.
3. Expanding partisan influence within various state institutions.
4. Dealing with political opposition as targeting the “victory” rather than a legitimate practice within the democratic system.

## 5. Linking the prestige of the state and its institutions to the prestige of the ruling party or alliance.

This confusion leads to weakening the state in the long run, as the state becomes linked to the fate of the controlling political force, rather than permanent and stable institutions. When that force declines or enters a crisis, state institutions are damaged accordingly. For the political force that believes it has settled the scene tends to become less willing to hear criticism or read social and political transformations, and here victory turns into a state of “political blindness”.

In Iraq, many governments and influential forces entered a state of excessive complacency after every political settlement or election, believing that stability had been achieved, that opponents had retreated, and that the street had been exhausted. However, the reality was completely different. What happened after the 2018 elections is a clear example of this, as political forces believed they had restored stability after the war against the ISIS organization, and the political and media discourse began to speak of “the new phase”. Yet, after only a few months, the Tishreen protests exploded, revealing the scale of separation between authority and society. Herein lies the paradox: the more the political elite’s sense of victory

increases, the more likely they are to lose the ability to see the real fractures within the state and society.

### **Seventh: The Illusion of Victory Weakens the Idea of National Partnership**

Iraq, by virtue of its political and social nature, cannot be managed through the logic of total dominance; it is a system of multiple components, centers, forces, and interests. Therefore, any sense of absolute hegemony automatically produces a corresponding feeling of fear or exclusion among other parties, and from here the process of “re-feeding the crisis” begins.

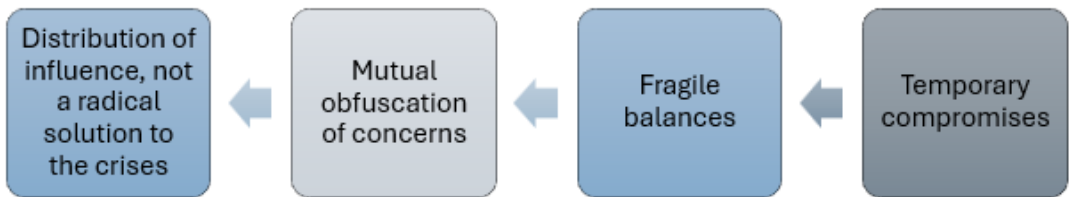
For when a certain political force believes it has achieved a final victory, it seeks to redistribute influence to serve its interests, and attempts to control political, security, and administrative decision-making, which weakens the scope of consensus and national partnership. Conversely, this drives opponents to reorganize themselves, while other forces begin to move defensively through a set of tools, most prominently: political disruption, often by disrupting the sessions of the Council of Representatives, or forming counter-alliances that reproduce the division within the political scene. This is accompanied by mutual media escalation, and matters may reach the

point of utilizing the street, employing state institutions, or even resorting to informal tools of force to defend interests and reject exclusion. Thus, victory does not produce political stability, but rather reproduces a new cycle of conflict.

Furthermore, the illusion of victory turns the state into an arena for settling scores; for when political forces deal with the state as the “winner’s prize,” state institutions themselves transform into tools for political conflict, instead of being neutral institutions working to serve the public interest. Here begins the most dangerous stage of erosion, as appointments become based on political loyalty, security institutions are restructured according to calculations of influence, the economy is managed through the logic of quota-sharing (muhasasa), and administrative decisions are tied to political balances, which leads to sacrificing competence in favor of political and partisan guarantees. In this case, the government appears strong on the surface because it controls power, but in reality, it weakens the state from within, because institutions gradually lose their independence and effectiveness. Over time, the state becomes incapable of managing major crises, because its structure transforms into an intersecting network of interests rather than a professional institutional apparatus.

## **Eighth: The Illusion of Victory: Fragile Stability and the Erosion of Legitimacy**

One of the most dangerous effects of the illusion of victory is creating a false sense of stability; political forces believe that merely forming the government or controlling the parliament means the crisis has ended, but in reality, the crisis has only entered a stage of temporary latency. In Iraq, political stability is often based on the following equation:



**Figure: Prepared by the researcher**

Therefore, any internal, regional, or economic change can re-explode contradictions very rapidly, which makes the Iraqi political system live in a state of “apparent stability and deferred explosion”. Consequently, political forces that deal with themselves as the permanent victor tend to interpret their remaining in power as evidence of legitimacy, even if their popularity has declined or popular anger against them has escalated.

However, legitimacy in modern political systems is not merely the ability to remain in power, but rather the ability to achieve a set of components and priorities of legitimacy, including:



**Figure: Prepared by the researcher.**

Note: The components and priorities of legitimacy have been arranged in an ascending order from lowest to highest; as providing services is considered the first component of legitimacy, while sustainable achievement represents its highest level.

When the government fails in these files, the contradiction begins to appear, as the authority sees itself as victorious, while society sees that the state is in a state of decline. Here, the process of the erosion of legitimacy begins gradually, even if

the government remains politically or organizationally strong. On this basis, the process of exhausting the state begins; for states, in many cases, do not collapse solely due to foreign wars, but may suffer from exhaustion from within as a result of their elites' inability to distinguish between the concepts of power and the state.

## Conclusion

The Iraqi experience since 2018 until the formation of the government on May 14, 2026, reveals that the fundamental problem does not lie in the election results themselves, but rather in the political culture that governs the way these results are understood. For Iraqi political forces still deal with any electoral or negotiating progress as a final victory, rather than a temporary responsibility within a fragile state that requires consensual management and strong institutions.

The “illusion of victory” in Iraq does not represent a mere error in judgment; rather, it is considered one of the structural causes for reproducing political failure. For when power transforms into an end in itself, and the state is reduced to partisan balances of power, elections turn into a mechanism for recycling the crisis instead of being a means to resolve it. The past years have proven that no political party, no matter how much influence, tools of force, or electoral legitimacy it possesses, can monopolize Iraq or settle it conclusively. For the composition of the state and society, in addition to regional and international balances, makes the idea of an “absolute victor” a recurring political illusion.

Without a deep review of the concepts of governance, the state, and political partnership, Iraq will remain spinning inside the same cycle: short media victories and long structural crises. Iraq today does not suffer from a lack of political actors, but rather from a surplus of conflict over power, and it does not suffer from the absence of forces, but rather from the absence of an inclusive national project. Therefore, the most dangerous thing it faces is not the political division in itself, but rather the continued belief in the possibility of complete dominance within a highly fragmented and complex system.



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and a participating society**

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