# The Legitimacy Crisis of Traditional Authority

**Zeinab F. Shuker**

## About

Al–Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al–Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

# The Legitimacy Crisis of Traditional Authority

**Zeinab F. Shuker***

In a statement on September 29th, Iraq's highest religious authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called on Iraqis to vote in the upcoming early elections held on October 10th. This represents a shift from his position during the 2018 elections, where he advocated for the electoral process to be improved and showed his understanding of the "people's disappointment" and lack of participation due to the shortcomings of previous elections. Still, he didn't call directly for citizens' involvement in the election process. However, his attitude shifted this time when he argued that elections are the only and the "safest" way to engage in the political process.[1] While some of the concerns he voiced in 2018 have been addressed in this current election cycle -- such as changes in the electoral law -- many of his other concerns, such as the need for elections competition to be based on clear economic policy and service programs, didn't come to fruition this time around. So why did al-Sistani, who attempted to separate himself from the political decision-making process, choose to encourage voters' participation this time around?

In Iraq's hybrid state, tutelary bodies -- also known as states within the state, or the centers of power that exist outside of the state apparatus yet can shape and veto political decisions by elected leaders -- have played an essential role in the formation of the Iraqi state post-2003. These tutelary bodies, which took the form of tribal and

1. Shia News Association. (2021). " His Eminence Al–Sistani Encourages Iraqis To Participate In The Upcoming Elections." https://tinyurl.com/yf4bjp2u

* Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, and Professor in the Department of Sociology at Sam Houston State University, USA.

sectarian systems and institutions, have taken advantage of the weak state apparatus and the country's dependency on oil resources to fund a complex operation and a tangled network of patronage and support outside the structure of the state. However, like any group seeking to gain and maintain power -- or the ability of an actor or a group to make others respond to commands despite resistance, in the Weberian sense -- these groups must not only fund their power, but they also must legitimize their authority to wield that power. In the case of Iraq, that form of authority took the form of traditional legitimacy. In the case of al-Sadr, he also mobilized his charismatic character as an added layer of legitimacy, in addition to his constant utilization of another form of traditional legitimacy -- the family, 'al-Sadar' -- as Harth Hasan argues.[2] These forms of authority have not only existed alongside the modern state, but they were also fundamental in the slow decay of the state's rationalized authority. It is important to note that traditional authority is not automatically an antithesis to rational authority and the modern state. For example, the monarchies of Western Europe have co-existed alongside strong democratic governments.[3] Yet, the nature of the rentier economic system in Iraq, embedded in the weak state institutions, has provided the conditions of these groups to tie and maintain their form of legitimacy to economic access. The base of that economic access is attached to the price of the oil barrel.

2. Hasan. H. (2021). "Shiite forces and the Iraqi elections: The Sadrist Movement as a model" Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.https://www. dohainstitute.org/ar/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The–Shia–Forces–and–the–Iraqi–Elections–Sadrist–Currents.aspx
3. Tieleman, J., & Uitermark, J. (2019). Chiefs in the City: Tradition–al Authority in the Modern State. Sociology, 53(4), 707–723. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518809325

To utilize the Weberian notions of ideal types of legitimacy, traditional authority is 'resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions'.[4] Traditional authority – like those present in tribal, religious, and sectarian groups and institutions – rests on the affectual attitude of actors in the absolute value of the existing norms that maintain the system in place and is based on a sense of obligation and duty towards the source of the authority. Since traditional authority is not associated with an individual --unlike that of charismatic authority -- obligation of actors is towards the traditional institution itself, as in the tribe or the sect. Since 2003, Iraq has lacked a strong alternative to the traditional model of authority. In fact, the rational-legal authority of the state was undermined before 2003 where Saddam had utilized a combination of charismatic and traditional legitimacy, combined with a complex system of terror and total hegemonic control. Post-2003, the existing societal factions – shaped by national and international interests – took advantage of that state weakness to create power centers outside state institutions.

Additionally, true charismatic leaders, other than al-Sadr to some degree, have not emerged in the country as well. Any form of a legitimate order in the country was left to be based on tribal and sectarian groups that provided a sense of solidarity and social cohesion, protection, and economic gains. Ibn Khaldun's 'Asabiyyah' also highlights that for solidarity to be maintained within these forms of authorities (or what Durkheim refers to as mechanical solidarity), a threat to the overall survival of the groups should be present. An example of this would be the creation and maintenance of solidarity and collective consciousness by fighting against a common enemy, which can undermine the group's survival. And thus, in addition to the vacuum of authority and power of state after the collapse of Saddam's

---

4. Weber, M. (1984). Economy and Society: A Study in the Integration of Economic and Social Theory (T. Parsons & N. J. Smelser, Eds.). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

regime, these tutelary bodies enforced a sense of need among their people around creating an urgency for survival. The Kurdish tribes, families, and political parties utilized that notion of us vs. them (Arabs); the Sunni tribes and religious groups used a similar tactic of highlighting and playing on the loss of political and economic power post-2003; while Shiite groups have used a similar language, as well as adding to it defending the country against the rising forces of ISIS.

Yet, one weakness of traditional authority is based on its inflexibility to change. While the primary "threat" for the Kurds and the Sunnis has not changed to a large degree in the past years, ISIS's power has been significantly undermined in the past few years, Shiite groups have failed to find an effective alternative to create social cohesion, and citizens' attention shifted towards their economic interests. Yet, the economy has only worsened. Poverty rates have shot from around 20% in 2018 to more than 30% in 2020, with the worst levels of poverty and unemployment being in southern and Shiite cities and towns[5]; and around 60% of the country's 40 million population is below 25 years old.[6] A number that is expected to increase further. With the weak economic structure, levels of unemployment rose from 12.87% in 2018 to 13.74% in 2020.[7] This economic condition didn't only undermine the trust in the institutions of the state, but it primarily undermined the confidence in the traditional authorities that have controlled the state since 2003. Economic hardship, and both a

5. Fordham, A. (2021). "In Iraq›s ‹Dire› Economy, Poverty Is Rising — And So Are Fears Of Instability." NPR. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/03/961149079/in-iraqs–dire–economy–poverty–is–rising–and–so–are–fears–of–instability
6. Amirali. A. (2019). "The 'Youth Bulge' and Political Unrest in Iraq: A Political Economy Approach." K4D, Knowledge, Evidence, and Learning for Development https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17719/pdf/687_youth_bulge_and_political_unrest_in_iraq.pdf
7. Trade Economics. (2021). "Iraq Unemployment Rate." https://tradingeconomics.com/iraq/unemployment–rate

legitimacy and solidarity crisis, have pushed many youths, mainly from the south, to the streets during the 2019 Tishreen Uprising, seeking a new source of social cohesion, and economic and political alternative projects. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic halted travel and led to a dwindling in demand for fuel, which brought government revenues tumbling along with oil prices, deepening that economic, and by extension, the legitimacy crisis of these traditional authorities. The collapse of the price of oil only increased the contempt and the alienation of the population, and with that, the slow decline of the legitimacy of the traditional authority.

As a result, it is no surprise that when the leaders of the traditional institutions felt that their power and authority were being undermined, they sought to regain legitimacy, and access to resources, by encouraging citizens to vote in the election process. Loss of access to positions within the state apparatus is an existential threat to these centers of power because it will signify the loss of prestige and a significant loss of economic resources. Yet, the damage has already been done. The low turnout rate shows a clear sign of the traditional institution's overall decline of power, authority, and legitimacy, especially among Shiites. Despite al-Sistani's call, only around 43% voted (36% of eligible voters), the lowest in the country's post-2003 history --compared to 44.5% in 2018, according to official numbers -- with Baghdad experiencing the lowest turnout (around 31%[8]) compared to the highest turnout rates in rural areas where traditional authority tends to be the strongest.

Looking more closely at the result, we will see more apparent evidence of that decline of legitimacy, even though election results indicated that the al-Sadr bloc is the biggest winner in the elections

8. Davison. J and Rasheed. A. (2021). "Turnout in Iraq›s election reached 41% – electoral commission."https://www.reuters.com/world/middle–east/polls–open–iraq–general–election–state–tv–2021–10–10/

in terms of seats. For example, in al-Najaf, the Sadr bloc had 82,223 votes in 2014 and won 2 seats, and it gained 92,219 in 2018 and won 4 seats. Yet, in this election, the number of votes went to 61.637 votes, corresponding to 5 seats. In other words, the new election law has increased the number of seats for the Sadrist bloc. Even though they were very effective in mobilizing their core base using tools like social media and mobile apps, the overall number of their base has declined. The Popular Mobilization Unit's Fatah only received 17 seats, less than the 48 seats they gained in 2018.[9] Part of that massive decline is an issue of lousy campaigning and fractalization of leadership, leading to the waste of votes among multiple candidates, something which the Sadrist avoided. Similarly, the Hakim-Abadi coalition managed only five seats this election, compared to the 42 seats the Abadi coalition won in 2018 and the 19 seats al Hakim's Hikmah Movement gained in the previous elections.[10] As a result, a critical reason for the massive Sadrist success is due to the ability to understand the new law and effectively organize their campaign.

However, another essential part of that overall decline can also be explained in the shift in votes towards independents and Tishreen based political parties-- predominantly Shiite -- who received 40 seats. Imtidad, a new party associated with the protest movement, won 9 seats across the south. Looking more closely at the numbers, in Dhi Qar, Imtidad candidates came first in every electoral district receiving 150,000 votes but receiving only five seats, compared to the Sadrist's eight seats, who received significantly fewer votes. None of these patterns were observed in 2018. As Ali Al-Mawlawi argues, Imtidad and other independent candidates and smaller parties have the potential to gain more seats in the next elections with more practice of the electoral process and a better

9. Abbas. A. (2021). "Iraqi election shakes up Shiite political old guard." Al–monitor https://www.al–monitor.com/originals/2021/10/iraqi–election–shakes–shiite–political–old–guard#ixzz7AA3CGu9O

10. Mansour. R. (2021). "Explaining Iraq's election results." Chatham House. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/explaining–iraqs–election–results

understanding of their political base.[11] Overall, even though the numbers seem to change slightly based on different reports, independents came in first place with around two million votes, followed by al-Sadrist bloc with 885317 votes. Meanwhile, State of Law received 502.196 votes, and Fatah received 444,762, a major decline from their results in 2018, where each of the traditional parties had received more than one million votes.[12]

I argue then that the lack of participation and the low turnout rates reflect citizens' apathy towards the traditional authorities that controlled the state since 2003, rather than an apathy toward the state itself or the democratic process. This is evident by the limited votes the traditional parties received, the shift in votes towards new rational-legal legitimacy-based political parties, and the interest many Iraqis on the street have expressed in participating in the next elections after seeing that the authority of traditional centers of power can be broken.

An alternative way of understanding the election results is that low turnout rates – and voters' shift in general – is less about a win to independents and emerging rational-legal political parties. Instead, it is a loss to traditional parties. After all, despite the current legitimacy crisis, these traditional parties still control power and resources outside and inside the state apparatus. Additionally, these traditional groups still have access and control over coercive force, something which independents and new Tishreen parties don't have access to. Furthermore, it is unlikely for those traditional authority groups – those who won seats in this election cycle and those who didn't win many seats – to escalate the situation towards armed confrontation, as this would further threaten the existing system which they seek to protect. Overall, while on the short run, low voter turnout did benefit the traditional parties and groups, since a higher turnout rate would've

11. Al–Mawlawi. A. (2021). "Deep Data: What the election results say about political contestation in Iraq." Amwaj https://amwaj.media/article/what–do–iraq–s–election–results–tell–us–about–political–contestation
12. Dagher. M. (2021). "Separation of suspicion in the election box (4)." https://iiacss.org/ar/uncertainty–in–the–ballot–box–5/

led to more seats to independents and Tishreeni's based groups, on the long run, these low turnout rates indicates that traditional groups couldn't mobilize the population beyond their core supporters.

While hybrid regimes, such as Iraq, are weakened by the existence of centers of power outside the state apparatus that rely on non-rational and legal bases to legitimize their authority, these regimes also provide the space for oppositional parties to rise, as we saw in the Tishreen protests and the current elections. What these oppositional parties need to do, however, is to take advantage of the recent weakness of the current model of authority and seek to establish a unified counter-hegemonic front around economic, political, and social ideologies. Alternative political parties must establish themselves as an alternative source of social cohesion to the population. But it is also crucial for these groups to tackle the political and economic conditions that allowed the dysfunctional system to rise in the first place, which is the state's hybridity and dependency on the rentier economy.