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Women In Emerging Parties: What Has Changed?

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Women In Emerging Parties: What Has Changed?

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The effects of long decades of wars and internal conflicts have been reflected in political and social life in Iraq. Twenty years after the democratic transition process, Iraq still falls within the hybrid democratic system, or partially authoritarian according to the Global Democracy Index, indicating the system's stagnation and its rigidity toward fundamental democratic transformation. This stagnation is reflected in the performance of the political system and its ability to provide services and grant and protect freedoms in all forms, including political freedoms. However, the ideological nature of Islamic political parties and their policies based on personal gain pushed for significant changes, the most recent of which was the entry of ISIS into western Iraq. In 2019, significant protests erupted in central and southern Iraq.

Women participated in an unprecedented way in the protests after they were the most affected parties by the successive policies in Iraq that produced wars, unemployment, and poor services, in addition to the absence of feminist representation of women's issues within the political system. Hence, women had an unbridled desire for change and became an essential part of it. It can be said that post-2019 represents the second stage of the democratic transition in Iraq, which witnessed the establishment of new opposition parties with civil intellectual orientations joined by women after participating in the protest movement.

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This study aims to learn more about women's situation within emerging parties; Is there active participation of women within these parties? Do women have a role in making decisions? Do women participate in critical meetings; Is their opinion considered in the development of partisan politics?

This study also seeks to know emerging parties' intellectual methodologies: Is what they adopt authentic and applicable within their structure? How do leaders of emerging parties and members deal with women within the party? How does the presence of women in emerging parties differ from their presence in traditional parties?

Interviews with leading women within emerging parties and female activists from the protest movement were conducted in this study. The researcher coded the interviewed females' names and did not mention any emerging parties so that the paper would not be misinterpreted as promoting one party over the other; The researcher took into account the recency of the political experience of the emerging parties. This paper aims to shed light on the situation of women within emerging parties and provide recommendations that may help these parties to improve the political reality of women within them.

First: Women And Protest: An Unexpected Social Actor

The protest erupted in an unprecedented way that the political history of Iraq has never witnessed, driven by the revolutionary forces of a generation that nobody expected to be able to move a pawn on a chessboard yet proved their ability to checkmate the King.

These protests were not isolated from reality but rather a natural reflection of young people's anger about this system that provided them with nothing but unemployment and poor services. It is a generation that is open to the world and compares its life with other people's lives worldwide.

The participation of protesting women in October began to take shape after October 25, 2019. “Anger” was the common and the most critical motive that women expressed during the interviews for their participation in the protests, as the excessive use of force by the authority, and the killing of young protesters on October 1, 2019, generated a sense of anger and responsibility in participation. What is remarkable about these protests is that the greater the level of repression, the greater the presence of women, in a precedent that Iraq has not witnessed in its political history.

Women participated in previous protests that took place in post-2003 Iraq. However, participation was limited to the elites, as it was limited to a group of women in civil society organizations. The problem with these protests was that they were pushed by a specific narrative, whether civil society organizations or political or religious parties, to take on the role of the popular movement, and demands changed with the change of that movement. These roles, which the political and religious parties assumed in previous protests, caused women not to want to be part of these movements because they did not express what these women wanted.

Women’s participation in the protests was not usual in Iraqi society. Women did not go out to the protest space following the men of their families, as was the case during women’s electoral participation, for example, and not as an adoption of their values and ideological concepts, nor as a result of the awareness campaigns launched by feminist organizations. Rather, they rushed on their own and took the decision to protest¹. It is well-known that Iraqi society has a culture that adopts a patriarchal system that does not attach great importance to the role of women in public affairs. The applicability of the protests’ goals and their

1. Asmaa Jamil: Tishreen Protests from the Perspective of Women, a research published in the book (Protest Behavior in Iraq: Individual and Collective Dynamics), Intellectual Studies, University of Kufa 2020

transformation to something similar to the ideology of change with the goals of heads of households and males in families made women's presence in the protests more acceptable to men². This participation was crucial in breaking stereotypes about women's roles and their space in the public sphere. Women have played non-traditional roles, such as standing on the front lines in the face of power, leading protest marches, and raising slogans. This participation had a fundamental role in the continuation of the protest, especially by school and university students, which was called the "White Shirts Revolution" and the "White River," which filled the squares every morning to deliver a message confirming the peacefulness of the protest and the broadening of its social base.

The female presence was diverse, as there were activists in civil society, university and school students, and housewives who were brought together by an awareness linked to enthusiasm, impulsiveness, and responsibility toward the cause of their homeland. The older women had two primary reasons for their presence: The first was to monitor their young offspring, that were eager to stay in the confrontation squares. The second was connected with the density of religious symbols in their thoughts (such as Husseini convoys' presence in squares, the slogan of reform referred to a well-known saying in this regard by Imam Al-Husseini bin Ali and the support of Almarjjeia). The support of the demonstrators was equal to the support of the pilgrimage to the holy shrines. Thus, the presence of older women was motivated by the desire to give, in providing the service to seek moral reward³.

2. Dr. Ali Taher Alhamood: Memory of Pain - October, Justice, Ending Impunity, a series of publications by Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Baghdad, 2022.

3. Tishreen protests in Iraq, the agony of the old and the intractability of the new, a group of researchers, Dr. Ali Taher Alhamood: Iraqi protests 2019: a sociological view of what happened and its possible outcomes, Iraqi Society for Political Psychology, 2020.

This feminist presence was not separated from the general protest atmosphere, as women's demands were not factional. Instead, there was a familiar feeling among all women and men that their demands fell within what the protest movement was trying to achieve: "we want a homeland." (B.M., an activist in the protest movement) says: "The participation of women in the protests had an important significance, which is that they are essential partners in this country. When the slogan (We want a homeland) was raised in the protests, we participated as women because the homeland is for everyone and is not restricted to men only to defend".

As for the feminist marches that took place at a later stage of the protest, they were nothing but a challenge to some Islamic political groups who tried to tarnish the image of this feminist presence by publishing about the inadmissibility of women participating in protests and the prohibition of mixing with men. Feminist marches appeared, such as: (Banatak Ya Watan; Your daughters O'homeland) and (Sawtaj Thawra; Your voice is a revolution); Feminist slogans rose, such as: (Minu Gal Sawtaj Awrah Sawtaj Muftah Li Kul Thawra; Who said that your voice is something to be shamed for, your voice is the key to every revolution), and (Haya Banatak Ya Watan Haya Dhahat Bidamiha Wa Rafaat Alrayah; Your daughters O'homeland sacrificed their blood and raised the flag) and others. Another point of view tells that the protests' division began when such factional marches started; women did not need to prove their presence because they had already done so.

Second: Protests And Political Participation Of Women

The participation of women in the protest movement allowed them to get a closer look at the political reality and know its secrets, as women attended the discussion sessions organized inside the protest arenas. This participation motivated women to ask, What do we want from this participation? What will we do after the protest? What is our role as women in the next phase?

The participation of women in the protest movement conveyed important social messages; women could participate in public affairs, they have views and opinions about the political system, and not far from this space –which was thought to be reserved for men– also the level of desire for political participation increased among women after the protests. The protests changed the view of women towards their ability to participate in the political process, and the demonstrations were a turning point for many women. Z.A. (a former candidate for one of the emerging parties) said, “Before Tishreen, I had no political interest, not even voting in the elections. Election Day was like any other day, but in Tishreen, I was convinced that this system must change and that change cannot happen by sacrificing 800 martyrs in every protest for the sake of change, so I decided to enter the political field.”

Tishreen demonstrations were essential to raising women’s interest in political engagement, as proven by the 2021 parliamentary elections, in which women gained 95 seats, surpassing their quota. “In Tishreen, we were protesting; we were not politicians. We insulted politicians and did not want to enter their arena, yet we practised politics without realizing it; We exerted great public pressure, changed the election law, and brought down the government; Tishreen taught us politics,” stated W.N. (an activist in the protest movement).

Third: Emerging Parties: A New Actor In The Political Scene

Iraq's political system entered a new phase with the rise of new political leaders from all parties –each with a different point of view– that have held power since 2003 and till now. According to statistics from the Independent High Electoral Commission's Department of Political Parties and Organizations Affairs, 261 licensed political parties, 55 parties in the formation process, and 122 entities have expressed a desire to form a party; According to the data, 75% of them are emerging parties, while 10% are elite, old-traditional parties⁴. It should be recognized that not every emerging party symbolizes the civic trend or Tishreen. Instead, many emerging parties are sponsored by the old-traditional parties to present an appearance appropriate to the scene forced by Tishreen.

Emerging parties opposing the political system represent a healthy case for consolidating democratic practices. L.KH. (an activist in the protest movement) says: “The world views Iraq as a democratic country, and change can only happen through the ballot boxes. Therefore, the presence of emerging parties is necessary to compete with the parties of political Islam and bring about change.”

What distinguishes these parties is that they differ from traditional parties in essential aspects. Civilism and secularism are the salient features of the new leaders, and the belief in building a unifying national identity is the goal that unites them. That is why they worked to establish parties based on the principle of “citizenship” rather than sectarianism or nationalism, or gender. It is well-known that the post-2003 system is a sectarian-gender system, meaning that the “Almuhasasa” system was not only based on ethnic, religious, and sectarian differences but also based on gender discrimination. Identity politics also works on gender

4. Report of the Department of Political Parties and Organizations Affairs in the Independent High Electoral Commission, 2022.

norms, gender relations, and the exacerbation of social, economic, and political fragmentation since 2003, as well as the nature of the political elites that came to power, together created extreme forms of social control and reactionary currents that produced a gendered system par excellence⁵.

On the other hand, emerging political parties differ in their popular base. The base of the traditional parties is an ideological base that benefits from the existence of these parties because they obtained spoils. As a result of its support for the parties of political Islam, in contrast to the popular base of the emerging parties, it is a base that believes in civil, secular thought. It has no interests in the parties other than its desire to change and find someone to represent its intellectual orientations politically.

Notwithstanding the significance of these distinctions between old and emerging parties, the latter confronts several challenges:

- Due to their recent political experience, emerging parties suffer from the weakness of their organizational structure. Until now, the identity of many emerging parties and their political programs is still unclear, and some of these programs are complex and unrealistic. W.R. (a member of the general secretariat of one of the emerging parties) said: “The failure of the emerging parties is due to their dispersion due to the absence of a unified vision, the quest to appear as a leader, and the non-participation of most of the emerging parties in the elections, which dispersed the votes of their audience towards other parties to which they do not belong intellectually.”
- The decision-making structure and drawing up of the party’s policies are not taken collectively and consultatively. Instead, in many emerging parties, they are subject to the mood and desire of

5. Zahraa Ali: Iraqi Women and Revolutionaries, Al-Safir Al-Arabi, 2020. Via the link: <https://tinyurl.com/2jmtcl2p>

the party's general secretary. (Z.GH., a former member of one of the emerging parties): "One of the important decisions taken by the Representatives who rose to represent the party in parliament was a single decision by the party's general secretary without referring to the general secretariat, which is a mistake that cost the party a lot."

Remarkably, the decisions of the most prominent emerging parties are central to a large extent, with the freedom of opinion available to members to express their opinions. This freedom frequently clashes with the views of the Secretary-General and others close to this position, compromising party stability and resulting in defections within the same party. H.K (who holds a leadership position in one of the emerging parties) says: "A serious decision, such as emerging parties boycotting elections, was taken unilaterally by the Secretary-General without referring to the opinion of the General Secretariat, even though the members' offices in the provinces were prepared for the elections."

- Many emerging parties suffer from the immaturity of their political programs and lack clarity in their social and economic ideologies. M.J. (a female who held a leadership position in one of the emerging parties) says: "Some of the emerging parties' Disadvantages are their adoption of specific issues such as martyrs' blood, their representation of the protest movement, and their omission of a social base that did not participate in Tishreen that's looking for traditional parties' alternative to represent them. The idea of the homeland as an identity is unclear regarding what these emerging parties mean. The difficulty is that the Emerging parties that ran in the elections and the independents who were part of the protest movement still speak with the logic of protest rather than politics; Their political and economic programs have yet to be established."
- Emerging parties suffer from poor funding, especially those that

represented the protests in 2020, as many relied on self-resources, member subscriptions, and donations from party supporters. However, these parties need funding to confront the traditional parties – which have Money, weapons, media, and a mass base that benefits from their existence and is associated with economic interests or ideological visions – in the elections.

The issue of funding has affected the emerging parties in two directions. First, some emerging parties continued their work without funding and financed themselves, but they remained weak parties unable to confront. The second direction was forming alliances and relationships with other political parties to obtain funding, which sparked debates between those who believe politics is the art of the possible and those who believe this is a concession to the principle and cause for which these parties were founded. They were also accused that some party leaders and close members had rapidly developed their financial situation at the expense of the rest of the members who preserved their sources of funds, and then significant disagreements and defections arose among them.

Fourth: Women’s Participation in Emerging Parties: Why These Parties?

Since the emerging political parties were established after the 2019 protest movement, they ultimately represented the pace and intellectual structure of this movement, in which women represented an essential axis. Therefore, these parties worked to attract active women in political protest activity within the new party systems. T.A. (member of the general secretariat of one of the emerging parties) says: “After 2003 and until now, we have not seen real women’s political representation in the government, so the presence of new emerging parties was an opportunity for women to enter politics.”

Women who are members of emerging parties, or have experienced joining emerging parties for a certain period, believe that the pre-protest stage did not result in any political formation expressing women's political aspirations and principles. Therefore, women interested in political affairs were waiting for the appropriate opportunity and party formation that expressed their principles and ideas to engage in political Action. The emerging parties represented the alternative to the traditional parties that represent political Islam. Despite the offers made by the traditional parties to women active in the protest movement to join them in organizations claiming independence or civility, they refused to join because of the previous experience of women, in which they were only a feminine front for the parties, without having an influential role in decision-making and decision-making within the parties.

The entry of women activists into the political movement to emerging political parties represented a continuation of the process of protest and change. Especially since the emerging parties were formed by people known to them from within the protest movement, this was a reassuring factor for them at first, except that the transition of women from the stage of protest to the stage of political Action was not an easy matter.

Emerging parties allowed women entry as members of the general secretariat and in the party's political and cultural offices. Some emerging parties also pushed women to obtain important leadership positions, such as deputy secretary-general and party spokesperson, and some emerging parties also worked to establish women's offices.

The Challenges Of Political Action Faced By Women Within The Emerging Parties:

- Women in politics suffer from poor political experiences and less political knowledge than men, especially since the world of politics is full of mazes and corridors, and it is a new journey for women in emerging parties.
- Women faced great difficulties in entering politics through the emerging parties, and the matter is not related to the emerging parties as much as it is related to the unstable security conditions and the out-of-control armed groups, which threaten everyone whose name is associated with Tishreen, which put women in a greater risk.
- The social customs adopted by the family push women in it to refuse political work or fear that their women will enter the world of politics; it is fraught with dangers. As for societal customs and traditions, women represent the honour of the family and clan, and any offence they may be exposed to threatens the reputation of this social system. Therefore, entering political work represents a significant challenge to two major systems in Iraqi society, the social and political. Women who could challenge and enter political work and join emerging parties faced the danger of entering as candidates for new parties opposing traditional parties in light of the unstable security conditions. Therefore, women candidates feared organizing campaigns and electoral conferences or announcing their candidacies.
- Financing election campaigns; Funding for the electoral campaign was self-financing in most of the emerging parties, which burdened women candidates, and it is known that women's economic resources are more limited than men's.

Fifth: Women Within The Emerging Parties: Have The Emerging Parties Presented A Genuine Alternative For Women?

First of all, it must be noted that the emerging parties are not a homogeneous bloc regarding ideas, principles, and orientations, although they share one concern and goal: the “homeland”. However, the way to reach this goal differs from one party to another; the new approach carried by the emerging parties is what prompted women to join them. Women interested in political affairs were waiting for a political organization that expressed the principles and ideas they believed in, such as secularism and gender equality, and this was the first moment in which the political system witnessed the establishment of parties from outside the body of the political system, to compete with parties entrenched in the Iraqi state that possess Money, Power, and Arms. Although the path of political change is slow, it is the first seed that will change the future political map, and this is what happened when the “Emtidad” party won nine seats, as well as the rise of a number of independents.

The Situation Of Women Within Emerging Parties: Participation In Decision-Making

The emerging parties are not the same in their dealings with women. Some women expressed in the interviews that the emerging parties gave women a vital position. Instead, they did not distinguish between a woman’s and a man’s voices within the party, as all members could vote on decisions or reject them. As Z.G. (a former member of one of the emerging parties and holds a leadership position) says: “Women are equal to men within the party, and I felt that my voice was being heard, as the party gave me an important position in it.” This opinion was supported by H.K. (a former candidate and member of one of the emerging parties), saying: “The party gave women a space within it. Even the resignations that some women submitted to the party were

not due to marginalization. On the contrary, it was because they had opinions and points of view towards the party's policy and work contexts, indicating a status change of Iraqi political women who have a vision, an idea, and a cause that they defend and take a position on, and are not just affiliated with the party.«

W.A. (a female who holds a leadership position in one of the emerging parties) says: "The emerging parties support and encourage the presence of women and their political participation. When I entered the party, I got an important position, and after that, I got the presidency of one of the party's offices. As women, we have our opinions and strong influence in the party's general secretariat."

On the other hand, the other part of them indicated that the emerging parties did not differ in their dealings with women from the behaviour of the traditional parties. Some of the women who obtained leadership positions within the emerging parties mentioned that the parties' decisions are taken without their participation; even if they are in a leadership position, all important meetings with political leaders are held without women's participation; Some of the emerging party leaders still have a tribal social mentality. Although there is great flexibility in hearing opinions and decision-making, party policies are taken away from the participation of women, as H.K. (a member of the General Secretariat and has a leadership position within the party) says: "There is still a lack of faith in the capabilities of women within the party. I have a key position within the party, but I did not participate in any meeting with decision-makers and politicians because it is limited only to the party's general secretary."

M.J. (former member of one of the emerging parties) says: "At the beginning of my entry into the party, I was a member of the General Secretariat and a member of the Political Bureau, but I did not participate in the meetings of the Political Bureau, especially the meetings that

discuss sensitive political issues, or in the important meetings with decision-makers. Until this moment, we as women did not feel that the emerging parties trusted the opinion and voice of women within them.

The Situation Of Women In The Emerging Parties: Motives For Withdrawal

- The structure of some emerging parties is still somewhat fragile and is not much different from the structure of other parties and institutions within the country in protecting women from harassment that they may be exposed to within this institution, which prompted many women who become members of emerging parties to withdraw from them. Women's feeling of discomfort or harassment within the party, which most of the women expressed, is not strange or surprising, as the members and founders of the emerging parties are the children of this environment that lacks a model that can be followed to create a party mechanism that gives the woman her status and provides her with safety. However, this realization was one of the crucial motives for the withdrawal of many women from some emerging parties.
- The difference in vision and viewpoints between women and the party's policies, women who join emerging parties do not feel that they are just a number added to the list of members, and they do not feel that the party has any merit in their arrival. On the contrary, women believe – for the first time – that they are essential in the equation of the emerging parties, which must consider the principle of justice and equality that they call for – at least within the party – in making decisions and formulating policies. Therefore, women's feeling of marginalization within the party or their lack of conviction in the party's policy and decisions motivates them to withdraw.
- The political concern in Iraq is greater than the social, as the

emerging parties adopted the same context as the traditional parties to win over the public through political issues. Therefore, women have another political ambition, such as establishing their parties – especially the women who withdrew from the emerging parties – as they have come to the conviction that women must form the feminist party that they dream of. They believe that the issues of the family, women, and childhood are central and that a party must be established that believes in these issues and defends them; women parliamentarians from emerging parties, or those who became independent, their performance is still characterized by randomness. Women’s issues still represent secondary and unimportant issues for them. Although what is expected of them is a new approach and a feminist parliamentary behaviour that takes upon itself the authentic representation of women.

Conclusion:

Women’s political participation after 2019 represents a real breakthrough that can be built upon in developing the future of women’s political participation. Likewise, the existence of new parties with civil ideologies that give women space to express their political opinions is a qualitative transition towards effective political participation of women. Despite the problems identified in the paper regarding how the emerging parties deal with women, it is necessary to recall the recent political experience of these parties, which can be developed and corrected. Through the interviews, a number of recommendations can be indicated to improve the reality of women’s political participation within the emerging parties:

- The leaders of the emerging parties must present a real picture of the new thinking that these parties carry through the true belief in the ability of women, listening to their opinions, and giving them sufficient space to express their opinions as members, not as women.

- Assigning positions to women within the party is not enough. Instead, women must play the role required by the position entrusted to them, such as involving them in meetings and discussions with decision-makers or members to discuss political issues about the party.
- Take decisions collectively within the party, so women do not feel marginalized or excluded.
- Holding seminars and training workshops to qualify the party's women and empower them politically, so they have an active role in discussing and making party decisions.