The waning influence of political Islam in Iraq

Shatha Al Juburi [1] 25 November 2009

Following oppression under the rule of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi’s Islamists appeared set to take centre stage in the country’s politics. Six years on, the popularity of Islamism is fragile, and the secular nationalism once espoused by the Ba’athists is again in resurgence.

When the former Iraqi regime fell in 2003, Islamic political discourses seemed bound to thrive in the huge vacuum left by the Ba’athist regime which had ruled Iraq for 35 years, during which time it had crushed all secular and liberal movements in Arab Iraq. The Iraqi opposition parties, mainly composed of Islamic parties, were united to topple the Ba’athist regime at any price and they collaborated with the Bush administration to achieve their goal.

However, it has since been shown that these Islamic parties were only united because of their hostility to former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. After taking power, the Islamist parties have been hampered by their political, ideological and religious differences, which later led to a power-sharing government based on ethnic or sectarian identity.

The Islamic discourse in Iraq suffered a serious crisis, in particular after the bombing of the Shiite Imams’ shrines in Samarra in 2006. The Islamic political discourse was increasingly divided into Shii and Sunni, with the result that Iraq was on the edge of civil war, with thousands of Iraqis killed and more than four million displaced.

While in power, the Islamist parties faced further challenges, with a lack of services, corruption, poor security performance all undermining their popularity.

Moreover, Islamists are suffering a crisis provoked by the revival of nationalism. After having failed to govern on the basis of sectarian and ethnic quotas, Iraqis have realised the value of Iraq’s national identity. Accordingly Iraq’s prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, entered the last provincial elections leading the “State of Law” electoral list, emphasizing nationalist credentials while avoiding the religious slogans espoused by his rivals like ISCI and the Sadrists.

The next general elections, which are scheduled 18 January 2010, have pressed the Islamic forces in Iraq to change not only their alliances and appearance, but also to include less overtly Islamist forces in order to appear acceptable to the Iraqi voters.

During the 2009 provincial elections, incumbent Islamic parties, except for al-Makili’s Da’aw which played down its religious base and focused on security gains, lost in nearly every province as voters chose politicians that vowed to improve security, reduce corruption, support Iraqi nationalism and reject sectarianism.

In the run up to the 2010 elections, two non-sectarian political alliances emerged. One is led by Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia and former Baathist, who was the first Iraqi prime minister after the fall of Saddam Hussein. He has teamed up with Saleh al-Mutlaq, a secular Sunni MP and the leader of Dialogue Front, to form the Iraqi National Movement. Allawi recently announced that Tariq al-Hashemi, the Sunni vice-president and former leader of Iraqi Islamic Party, would join them.

Another new cross-sectarian coalition is Unity, led by Jawad al-Bolani, the interior minister, a secular Shia, along with Ahmed Abu Risha, the prominent Sunni Sheikh and head of the Awakening Council which fought Al-Qaeda and drove them from Anbar province.

The emerged alliances and new polls show that most Iraqi Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites, want an end to
sectarian violence and are tired of the Islamic parties seen as responsible. Instead, they favour a
unified nation and strong central government. Secular nationalism now seems to dominate political
landscape in Iraq.

**Country or region:** Iraq  
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About the author

Shatha Al Juburi is an Iraq and Middle East political analyst, researcher and journalist. She has worked for several think tanks and consultancies including “Babylon Centre for Research and Strategic Studies”, “Control Risks” and “Exclusive Analysis” and “APS Consultants”.

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