

# There can be no 'going back to normal' in Iraq

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**The protests in Iraq may have subsided, but it is only a matter of time before people are back in the streets.**

Earlier this year, there was much hope among politically active youth in Iraq that the fall would reignite the revolutionary fervour of last year's October protests and bring large crowds back to the streets of Iraqi cities.

But October came and went and large-scale demonstrations did not take place. Baghdad's Tahrir Square, once the epicentre of the protests, was cleared of tents and reopened for traffic for the first time in a year. For many, this marked the end of the "October revolution", in which young people occupied squares across the central and southern provinces of Iraq to demand their rights and an overhaul of the political system.

However, it is too early to pronounce the "death" of the Iraqi protest movement. The violent crackdown and [brutal assassinations](#) of protesters may have succeeded in temporarily holding people off from the streets, but it is only a matter of time before Tahrir Square is occupied again and revolutionary momentum returns.

## The October revolution

Although there had been mass demonstrations taking place regularly since at least 2011, what set the 2019 protests apart was not only their scale - with more than one million Iraqis repeatedly taking to the streets in October and November 2019 - but also the coherence of the popular demands.

People were not simply calling for basic services, employment and an end to corruption, as they had done before. Rather they were demanding a complete overhaul of the governance system - dissolving the [muhasasa ta'ifia](#), which allocates government positions on the basis of religious and ethnic affiliations and which is widely seen to be the source of systemic corruption, and building a unified secular national state.

Tahrir Square, a neglected roundabout in downtown Baghdad, became the symbolic centre of this protest movement. Activists had held demonstrations there regularly since 2015, but on October 25, 2019, they managed to wrest control of the square and proceeded to occupy it for a year.

During this period, they cleaned up the areas in and around Tahrir Square, painted murals dedicated to fallen protesters and provided food, entertainment and sanitation services. In this way, they created a "mini state" that at once opposed everything that Iraq has become since 2003 and put forward a new vision of what it could be.

## Government inaction

In response to the news that Tahrir Square had been cleared, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi took to social media to thank protesters for their “cooperation” in clearing the square and allowing a return to “normalcy”. But one has to wonder what “normalcy” the prime minister sees in the current state of affairs.

The situation in Iraq was far from normal before the protests broke out, with the country facing multiple interlinked crises. Baghdad was ranked the least liveable city in the world in 2018. This has much to do with the continuing large-scale embezzlement of reconstruction funds which has prevented the rehabilitation of infrastructure and housing damaged and destroyed in the 2003 invasion and the subsequent sectarian civil war.

Corruption has also prevented the Iraqi government from providing basic services, including electricity and clean water, in one of the world’s most resource-rich countries. In the southern city of Basra, contamination of the main water source “Shat al-Arab”, led to the hospitalisation of at least 118,000 people in 2018. What is more, this summer the city, along with the rest of Iraq, saw nearly 24-hour-long electricity blackouts amid record temperatures.

Infighting between Iraqi officials looking to expand their influence and self-enrichment has undermined every Iraqi government since 2003. In 2019, Health Minister Alaa Alwan, for example, submitted his resignation twice in the span of six months, citing mismanagement and blackmail in a health ministry devastated by corruption.

Government dysfunction and mismanagement have also left the Iraqi economy in tatters and completely dependent on oil revenue, which has been dwindling because of the collapse in oil prices in recent years. This has curbed job creation, which has particularly affected the young people, with some estimates putting youth unemployment as high as 46 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation only worse, putting 4.5 million Iraqis at risk of falling below the poverty line.

There has also been nothing normal about the security situation in Iraq. Barely surviving the ISIL’s onslaught in 2014, the country is now in the grip of various armed militias known collectively as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), some of which continue to undermine government efforts to take control of the security apparatus.

These groups have political wings which contested the 2018 general elections and now have representation in Parliament and therefore legislative power. Pressure from these groups reportedly led to the demotion of Lt General Abdulwahab al-Saadi, the head of the highly-regarded counterterrorism forces – a move that sparked the October revolution.

Protesters have also accused these armed groups of being behind the violent attacks on protests and sit-ins in Baghdad and the southern provinces. Some 700 people have been killed and about 30,000 injured since the outbreak of the protests. None of the families of these victims can return to “normal”, as their demands for justice remain unaddressed.

## **Failed reforms**

Al-Kadhimi came to power promising reform but has so far delivered little. The main pillar of his reform plan was changing the electoral law and staging early elections, which was supposed to address one of the protesters’ demands.

The electoral law was indeed amended but not in a way that would actually allow for free and fair elections. Political elites [continue to rework](#) it to serve their own interests and to ensure that they can take as many seats as possible in the next elections.

So while the government may be able to pull off an early election next year, protest leaders and independent candidates will not be able to compete with the establishment parties and gain any meaningful representation in Parliament. In fact, some of them have had to flee the country because the [campaign of assassinations](#) and intimidation has escalated under al-Kadhimi's watch

What is more, while it may appear that new political parties have emerged, a closer examination of their loyalties and sources of funding show their association with members of the current political elite. An example of this is Ammar al-Hakim's rebranding of his Hikma movement and the emergence of associated youth groups claiming to represent protesters.

The second important pillar of the government's reform plan is the economy. Finance Minister Ali Allawi recently published a plan outlining a series of ambitious goals that must be achieved if Iraq is to overcome the current economic crisis. The five key reforms include ensuring financial stability, expanding job creation, providing basic services, improving governance and implementing legislative changes.

However, the road map does not provide any tangible plans on how these goals will be reached and it seems quite likely that the collapse of oil prices will render the government unable to pay its 4.5 million public sector employees.

While Iraqis are aware that reforms take time, having spent 17 years giving endless chances to the political elite, at the very least they want to see political will to implement reforms and actions that demonstrate change. This does not appear to be the case right now.

For this reason, it is foolish to expect that public anger will not erupt into another wave of protests. Already, protest action is taking place outside Baghdad. For example, on the same day that Tahrir Square was reopened to traffic in Baghdad, hundreds of protesters managed to hold on to Al Bahariya Square in Basra, despite being attacked with live fire and tear gas and having their tents burned down.

Protests were also held in solidarity with Basrawi demonstrators in Al Haboubi Square in Nasiriya and in the city of Samawah in Muthana province. This not only goes to show that the Iraqi protests are far from over, but also that attention should be paid to the south, which has historically been the heart of anti-government struggles in Iraq.

Ultimately, the October revolution has allowed Iraqis to imagine for the first time a country beyond the [muhasasa ta'ifia](#). As the late American anthropologist David Graeber argued, protests can break "existing frames to create new horizons of possibility, an act that then allows a radical restructuring of the social imagination". This "act" is the result of at least nine years of organising in Iraq, of protests being quashed time and again only to return stronger and more determined each time. After all, revolution is not a momentous occurrence. Rather, it is a process of constant give and take that begins with imagining the world anew.

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