

Original Article

Iraq's Political System: Examining the Structure and the Roadblocks to Reform

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Abstract - In 2005, the Iraqi government established a parliamentary democracy. The current study aims to examine the composition of Iraq's political system and pinpoint the barriers to political change as seen by different system participants (such as activists, political leaders, and the general public). For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted to explore the structure of Iraq's political system post-2003, identify key barriers to political reform, and analyze how these barriers affect governance and public life. The study identifies and examines political stability, reform, and democratisation challenges using interviews with key political actors, civil society members, and ordinary citizens. This research also offers insights into how Iraq can overcome political fragmentation, corruption, and sectarianism in its pursuit of effective governance. The result of the study suggests a fragmented political landscape that impedes the development of unified policies that benefit the country. Additionally, Corruption is identified as a major barrier to political effectiveness. It prevents reforms by creating a system where political elites prioritize personal or group gains over public interest.

Keywords - Iraq, Political System, Governance, Reform, Sectarianism, Corruption, Democracy, Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction

Iraq's turbulent past, which included armed conflict, foreign intervention, and authoritarian government, has influenced the country's political structure. Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq until the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. His totalitarian, authoritarian, and extremely oppressive administration was its defining feature. In addition to marginalizing different ethnic and religious groups, Saddam's dictatorship strengthened Sunni Arab control over the Kurdish and Shiite populations in the north. The regime was essentially autocratic, with a highly centralized form of government that allowed little opportunity for political opposition or pluralism (Dodge and Mansour, 2021). America led the coalition that created a new democratic framework for governance following the 2003 Iraq invasion, which removed Saddam Hussein from power. The creation of a new Iraqi government led to the 2005 drafting of a parliamentary democracy constitution (Al-Ali, 2014). The document established basic principles for multiple political parties and protected minority religious and ethnic populations through its federal governance structure. Iraq's political framework continues to face severe public divisions between its Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish populations, although it maintains these attractive goals. The new system's implementation became harder as Saddam's collapse left opportunities for armed groups to emerge, and corruption flourished between ethnic and sectarian groups. Iraq's

population features Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen, along with religious groups, including Christians, Yazidis and Mandeans, thus enlarging these differences. The nation of Iraq faces substantial political growth challenges from both international powers and neighbouring countries, as well as internal domestic issues, according to Henderson (2005). Throughout recent years, the United States, Iran and other regional powers have expanded their influence on Iraqi politics by extending support to various political factions and their representatives. External interference has made the establishment of an independent political system considerably harder to achieve.

The political framework of Iraq has experienced systemic breakdowns alongside persistent political standstill while splintering continuously through time. The complex political environment created obstacles to meaningful reform because it consisted of fragmented elites and widespread corruption and security issues, particularly from ISIS (Dawisha 2013). Coinciding political deadlock frequently occurs due to the system's mandatory power distribution approach that mandates key government positions to specific ethnic and religious membership groups. The originally inclusive power-sharing method became a driver of deepened religious cleavages instead of national unity, thus diminishing possibilities for unified national leadership. Iraq's essential



need for political transformation rises sharply as it recovers from military conflicts, particularly the ISIS-led 2014–2017 terrorist war.

The persistent presence of entrenched interests, safety dangers, and ongoing regional turmoil makes it difficult to establish enduring changes (Patton, 2007). Iraq's political system faces simultaneous moments of excitement and dissatisfaction owing to its continuous efforts to build an operational democratic system that includes all groups. Iraq operates with one of the most complex and vulnerable political frameworks in the Middle East, stemming from its long history of wars together with international interventions and political unrest (Ottaway, 2008). Iraq experienced a challenging transition to democracy in 2003 after Saddam Hussein's fall due to various obstacles (Skidmore, 1996). Substantial political, economic, and social reforms remain impeded because of unstable conditions, corrupt practices, and an absent consolidated government. Iraq operates as a multiparty parliamentary democracy, but the reality shows that the country has become deeply divided by sectarianism through which power rests between Kurdish, Shiite Arab and Sunni Arab groups.

A split political sphere exists today because commercial interests and patronage networks impose obstacles to implementing extensive transformations. Iraq faces a persistent challenge to attain equilibrium between its national government power and local autonomy since the Kurdistan region operates under an autonomous administration (Ottaway, 2008). Sectarian divisions persist in Iraq, causing political deadlock, institutional inefficiency, and increased corruption across the country (Serhang and Karim, 2024). The reforms face extensive difficulties because of past authoritarian rule while militia groups maintain power alongside geopolitical challenges in different regions. Public demonstrations demanding accountability, governance, and openness have initiated several new political and economic changes in Iraq. The research explores Iraq's political framework and identifies significant barriers to change while analyzing domestic and foreign elements that influence national political growth (Le Billon, 2007). The study analyzes official documentation, scholarly research, expert interviews, and media coverage to provide information on Iraq's political situation while identifying necessary actions toward reform.

After the constitutional changes in 2003, Iraq maintained critical institutional breakdowns because critical gaps existed between its democratic goals and actual political management.

The research fills the important discrepancy between Iraq's constitutional framework and its malfunctioning political system. The current research investigates how the structural politics of post-2003 Iraq functions by understanding the perceived obstacles to change from three

essential groups – political actors, civil society members and ordinary citizens.

The study's objective is to examine the composition of Iraq's political system and pinpoint the particular barriers to political change as seen by different system participants (such as activists, political leaders, and the general public).

Following are the research questions.

- What are the key structural features of Iraq's political system post-2003?
- What are the perceived barriers to political reform in Iraq?
- How do key political actors and ordinary citizens view the effectiveness of Iraq's political system and its reform efforts?

2. Literature Review

A comprehensive data search was employed using databases like Google Scholar to find out about the political system of Iraq. Previously, a study was performed where Sectarianism remains one of the most significant factors limiting Iraq's political development. The author describes how sectarian divides within Iraq have deepened political division until current political alliances are built exclusively on ethnic and religious loyalties instead of policy agreements. This situation has created an identity crisis by shifting political focus away from national betterment at the expense of sectarian agendas, thus blocking progress for policymaking and state-building. A second writer explains that Iraq's political structure emerged from the deep sectarian conflict, but the current post-2003 political system struggles to resolve these different blocs. Political instability and governance challenges persist mainly due to the way parties organize based on sect identity rather than political or ideological commonalities, which causes them to avoid national issue collaboration.

Researchers have shown that boundaries formed from sectarian alliances usually develop exclusive political rule that rejects policy-driven inclusive governance. The repeated appearance of this theme exemplifies a failure to develop national unity, which hinders the persistent development of democratic institutions.

Political effectiveness and reform systematically fail because of the widespread corruption found in Iraq. The research emphasizes how endemic corruption within Iraq's political structure has blocked economic progress and halted essential reforms. Another scholar confirms that political corruption amongst elite resource controllers has produced extensive inefficiencies and government accountability deficits. The ability of the state to deliver public service has diminished, and citizens have lost confidence in government operations.

A post-2003 invasion patronage network forms institutions for corrupting the political climate, thereby maintaining mechanisms for misgovernance. Saat et al. (2022) highlighted that the developed interactive model of corruption in Iraq severely hinders political productivity and reform. Several academicians have looked at international participation's impact on the nature of the political system in Iraq through several research studies. The scholar indicated that Iraq's relations with the US, Iran and its Middle Eastern partners shaped its political system in this respect (Paredes, 2003). From research, it emerged that foreign powers selected Iraq as their central stance for warfare, which went through political decision-making and reduced Iraq's national sovereignty. Foreign intervention provides the needed security and reconstruction, but international involvement weakens reform because foreign entities act in the best interest of the international community, not for Iraq's sovereignty and stability.

Information about the reforms in Iraq may be helpful for analyzing possible directions of its development, but at the same time, Iraq faces many severe challenges. A writer underlines that for Iraqi reform, it is necessary first to get rid of sectarian and patronage-based political systems that overpower governmental procedures. Despite the government setting up reform agendas of fighting corruption through political openness and increased political liberalization, a functional democracy that eradicates sectarianism could be developed. The author stressed that this is the best time for Iraq to seek national reconciliation through governance that allows every ethnic and religious group. In this case, different and better kinds of institutional development must be implemented to improve state capability in service provision and accountability.

Multiple studies analyzing Iraq's political system after 2003 emphasize its complex nature because political fragmentation combined with sectarianism, corruption and external foreign interference limits the prospects for reform. Scholars share the opinion that Iraq will succeed by implementing extensive reforms that tackle national tensions and outside interferences (Donais, 2005). Iraq will need complete political unity, reduced corruption levels, and enhanced international relationship management to secure long-term stability and maintain sustainable governance.

In contrast to the previous research works that aim at developing a macro-political understanding of reform constraints, the present work considers the macro-political perspective but also incorporates samples from civil society and citizens to capture a micro-political point of view. This contributes further to the argument by including the perceptions of ordinary people of Iraq and the local activists, which has not been documented sufficiently in the previous studies.

3. Methodology

Qualitative research techniques served this study, which focused on understanding stakeholder views and experiences regarding Iraq's political structure with its reform efforts. Semi-structured interviews were performed with politicians, civil society organization members, local activists, academics, and regular citizens to understand their views about Iraq's political system alongside its reform barriers. Researchers used purposive sampling to identify participants, which consisted of academics, policymakers, and civil society leaders, due to their experience with Iraqi political activities.

4. Data Analysis

A specific coding method helped identify both response categories and reform barriers.

The research framework incorporated constructivist grounded theory principles by gathering data from historical records, stakeholder insights, and current observations to develop an understanding of Iraq's political crises. Qualitative analysis was done through the systematic identification and assessment of recurring themes found in media reports, policy papers, and interview transcripts. This would help identify typical reform-related obstacles and evaluate how systemic problems like corruption and sectarianism appear in political discourse can be encountered. The constitutional structure focused on how power-sharing procedures are stated and if they lead to sectarianism and political fragmentation. Legislative proposals, policy documents, and reform agendas to gauge the conceptualization and execution of reform were examined. Reports evaluated Iraq's institutional and political development from institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and international nongovernmental organizations. Moreover, the local and foreign media coverage of Iraq's political issues to gauge public opinion on topics like government accountability, corruption, and political reform were evaluated to understand how media representation shapes political narratives and influences public opinion on reform initiatives.

4.1. Thematic Analysis

Recurrent themes or patterns were recognized about political structure, governance, and reform issues, and data from papers, case studies, and interviews were coded.

Major themes included are sectarian politics, institutional problems, corruption, foreign influence, and the role of civil society in political transformation. Questions that were asked from the participants were: How are political allegiances and governance choices influenced by sectarian identities, and how do these obstruct reforms meant to promote national unity? How corruption weakens government and makes it difficult for changes to be implemented successfully. What impact do partisan divides between political parties and alliances have on both governmental stabilities and policy creation?

5. Results

Table 1. Data sources gathered for the research

Data /Source Type	Source Details	Purpose/Contribution
Government Reports	Iraqi Government Publications (Ministries of Finance, Interior, Planning) (Al-Jabori, 2023)	Offers official information on policy, institutional frameworks, and governmental priorities.
	Iraqi Parliament Reports	Provides insight into legislative initiatives, challenges to reform, and political processes in the Iraqi Parliament.
	Public and National Opinion Surveys	Gauges public sentiment and opinions on key political issues and reforms.
Academic Studies	Political Science and International Relations Journals (e.g., <i>Middle East Journal</i> , <i>Journal of Democracy</i> , <i>International Affairs</i>) (Ismael and Perry, 1986)	Analyzes Iraq's political development, state-building, and democracy with an academic lens.
	Books and Theses on Iraqi Politics	Offers in-depth analysis of Iraq's political structure and historical context, often with theoretical insights.
	Research Institutions (e.g., <i>Brookings Institution</i> , <i>Carnegie Endowment</i> , <i>International Crisis Group</i>)	Publishes reports and policy analyses focusing on Iraq's political system and reform challenges.
Interviews and Expert Testimonies	Politicians and Political Analysts (local and international)	Provides insider perspectives on the practical challenges of governance, sectarianism, and reform efforts.
	NGO Reports and Interviews (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Transparency International)	Highlights issues of corruption, governance, and civil rights through the voices of citizens and experts.
	UN and International Agency Reports (e.g., UNAMI, World Bank)	Shares international assessments and expert interviews on political stability, governance, and reform progress.
Media Analysis	Local Media Outlets (e.g., <i>Al Sumaria</i> , <i>Al Iraqiya</i> , <i>Rudaw</i>) (Glioti, 2018)	Tracks real-time political developments, debates, and key figures, and provides local perspectives.
	International Media Reports (e.g., <i>Reuters</i> , <i>BBC</i> , <i>Al Jazeera</i> , <i>NY Times</i>) (Loomis, 2009)	Offers coverage of Iraq's political issues from an international viewpoint, reflecting external perspectives.
	Social Media Platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Telegram) (Barkho, 2007)	Uncovers grassroots movements, protests, and public opinion regarding political reforms and corruption.

Official Iraqi government documents released by ministries and parliament reveal essential information about state priorities, organizational frameworks, and present legislative activities. These official documents provide necessary information about presidential policies regarding national security, economic development and policy reform initiatives. These official reports carry controlled information while lacking complete transparency about key difficulties such as corruption and political instability in government records. Books and academic publications deliver comprehensive analytical information about Iraq's political transformation. These academic investigations perform detailed examinations of state-building initiatives, democracy-building barriers, and the historical background of Iraqi political structures. Through theoretical examinations of political dynamics, academic research delivers a

comprehensive understanding of how sectarianism, corruption and foreign influence affect the country (Wicken, 2013).

The study utilizes these sources to place Iraqi political matters within existing political science theories and the framework of past historical events. On-screen experts, including politicians and political analysts, provide authentic, updated perspectives inside their fields. People involved in Iraq's governance share their lived experiences through testimonies showing how they operate within a divided political structure. Research based on NGO reports and expert interviews offers a more detailed overview of corruption, civil rights, and governance matters. It presents researchers with two perspectives on marginalized communities or reform efforts. The local media networks of Iraq distribute real-time national political information as they cover trending events

highlighted by political discussions featuring prominent public figures in the country. International outlets evaluate Iraq's political system through external references and propose overseas strategies to transform the political framework. Social media enhances user-following of grassroots movement formation in real-time since it also captures the viewers' reactions to the political outcomes in real-time together with the demands for the movement. The primary sources are insightful on how actual policy decisions are being implemented and the social and political changes that ensue in the population.

Although the survey results only give quantitative information, they are enlightening regarding the general trends of the Iraqi perception of those political matters relating to governance corruption and formalism. The assessments provide helpful information to those in power by indicating the current nominal workloads of citizens, which in turn assists in targeting corrective-oriented governance efforts. That is the reason why surveys are subjected to accuracy problems, which can be traced to political influences alongside security threats in the region.

Table 2. Results of Thematic analysis

Theme	Sources of Data	Key Findings
Sectarianism	Interviews, Case Studies	Sectarian division impedes national cohesion and policymaking.
Corruption	Interviews, Policy Docs	Corruption limits political effectiveness and blocks reform efforts.
Political Fragmentation	Interviews, Case Studies	Fragmented parties make coalition-building difficult and destabilizing.
International Influence	Media, Policy Docs	Foreign influence plays a significant role in Iraq's political structure.

The religious factionalism in Iraq impedes the development of national unity between its citizens. National policies remain ineffective because various factions put their specific interests before working together for national objectives. Iraq's fragmented governmental design hinders the formulating of national policies that would benefit the nation. Studies identify widespread corruption as the main hindrance to successful political governance. The system spurs corruption that halts reform efforts because politicians choose personal rewards before public welfare benefits. The lack of political progress coupled with diminished public confidence in the system hampers the capacity for effective governance to occur. In a system of multiple political actors, the fragmentation of parties works against coalition-building since it creates difficulties in uniting political actors to form stable governments. The decentralized nature of political parties causes governments to experience operational difficulties because parties find it increasingly difficult to establish functioning alliances and produce coherent governance strategies. International forces shape the political form that Iraq experiences. Foreign powers engage in strategic moves by using Iraq for their purposes while simultaneously bringing positive or negative impacts. Since Iraq operates under international influence, its national autonomy suffers while its government must reconcile internal demands against the strategic needs of foreign actors.

6. Discussion

The study confirms that Iraq's unstable politics emerged from internal and external factors, according to Ottaway (2008). The deep divisions caused by sectarianism break down national unity while keeping politics fragmented, thus creating barriers to implementing effective public policies. Continuous institutional corruption intensifies a country's instability

because it prevents necessary changes and weakens political authority, leading to mistrust of official institutions (Dodge and Mansour, 2021).

Weak government performance emerges from political fragmentation because numerous competing parties create challenges for coalition formation, which results in governance instability and frequent legislative standstills. The enduring impact of foreign influence, mainly from the United States and Iran, creates additional challenges that result in Iraqi decisions diverging from their key national interests (Henderson, 2005). All these complex issues require deep system reforms that correctly solve internal fragmentation and external political constraints to create stronger and more effective governance. Iraq stands at a decisive point due to underperforming and tardy policy changes. Understanding Iraq's political structure, leadership obstacles, and reform limits will generate solutions for its governmental issues.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research examines key factors of sectarianism alongside corruption and institutional deficiencies by using a combination of case studies and interviews with policy document analysis and media content assessments to evaluate Iraqi conditions compared with other postwar states. The study endeavours to attain an advanced political understanding of Iraq and present potential reform directions based on its research outcomes. Qualitative research methods generate detailed information about obstacles that prevent political system development in Iraq. Institutional improvements, together with anti-corruption efforts, law enforcement reform and national dialogue, should be Iraq's approach to solving these reform obstacles.

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