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Sectarianism and Political Participation in Iraq

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There is ample evidence by now that the sad by-product of transitions from authoritarianism in plural societies is the exacerbating of ethnic and sectarian divisions. From Bosnia to Iraq, people who gained the right to make political choices freely for the first time, or at least for the first time after a long period of authoritarianism, tended to choose on the basis of their identity.

To some extent, of course, identity influences political choices in all countries. In the United States, white males are more likely to vote for the Republican Party than Hispanic females, and so on. Such tendencies are in most cases not an impediment to democracy as long as they are fairly fluid and subject to change, so that if parties change their policies, people change their vote.

The threat to democracy arises when identities become hardened and unchangeable. This derails democracy in two major ways. First, the swing vote dwindles or disappears altogether—few voters are going to be Sunni one time and Shia the next. And the outcome of elections is predetermined by the ethnic and sectarian composition of the population—elections turn into a census of ethnic or religious groups and majorities and minorities become permanent. As long as people vote their identities in Iraq, Sunnis will always be on the losing side, for example.

In theory, sectarianism is not inevitable in plural societies, and there is no end of advice offered by experts about voting systems that will blunt sectarianism or about consociational political systems that will accommodate hardened identities without conflict. In practice, such systems seldom work. Once sectarian identities become mobilized during a transition, they become irreversible in the short and medium term. And attempts to blunt conflict by mandating representation for all groups may maintain the peace for a while, but they create a vicious circle by reinforcing the identities that cause the conflict in the first place—as is the case in Lebanon.

Iraq is caught in the vicious circle of sectarianism threatening democracy. It is impossible to fully understand the politics of Iraq at present without taking into account the basis of the divisions between Shia, Sunni and Kurds. Those who try to play down the importance of sectarianism in a well-intentioned effort not to reinforce it are unlikely to gain a good understanding of Iraqi politics, because sectarian and ethnic divisions influence all other political dynamics. For example, there are

animosities and a history of violence between the two major Kurdish parties, the PUK and the KDP. When it comes to dealing with the government in Baghdad, however, they present a united front.

Iraq's unity is today tenuous at best. Kurds are constantly seeking to expand the limits of their autonomy and their success in signing contracts with major oil companies is a major step forward toward financial independence—and a major threat to a united Iraq. Sunnis provinces are restless, envious of Kurdish prerogatives but unable so far to secure the same. For the Maliki government, and its predominantly Shia supporters, the main concern is to maintain the power of the central government, not to protect the rights of minorities.

Under the circumstances, the issue of the rights of the smaller minority groups has received very little attention and as result their numbers have been dwindling rapidly as their members choose emigration over insecurity. Smaller minorities are officially represented in the Council of Representatives, with the constitution prescribing the number of seats each should have. But few individuals speaking for the smaller minority groups make no difference in a situation where the larger groups struggle for a greater share of power or for autonomy. Kurds pay lip service to the rights of minority groups in their region, particularly to the rights of Turkmen who constitute a sizable percentage of the population of the disputed city of Kirkuk. In practice, the larger groups are fighting for themselves, with little regard for the small minorities.

Sectarianism in Iraq has greatly complicated the transition. It has created serious tensions in the best periods and horrific violence and ethnic cleansing in the worst periods. It risks splitting the country. It has led to the complete disregard for the rights of the smaller minority groups. But it has become a feature of Iraqi politics that will endure.