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TISHREEN WOMEN AND THE 2021 IRAQI ELECTIONS

Visions, Challenges and Expectations

By Dr. Hadeel Abdelhameed

INTRODUCTION

Tishreen women¹ played active roles in the recent legislative elections that took place in October 2021. Aside from being candidates, women protesters were constituents, boycotters, and local observers and trainers. Women's contribution in this electoral round was highly influenced by their diverse participation in Tishreen that varied from providing logistical support, to forming human shields to protect male protesters². Due to these multiple roles, women's presence in the protest areas was extremely dangerous. A number of women protesters were forcibly disappeared³, others were threatened, thus, internally displaced⁴, and some were fatally shot⁵. The gender-based violence embodied the fragility of the security situation, placing women under a consistent pressure of intimidation and threat. The unleashing of armed auxiliaries and forces raised many questions about the notion of democracy in Iraq, enforcing public distrust not only in the political system, but also in the electoral process that legitimizes the regeneration of the political class. In this hostile context, it was central for Tishreen women to determine the form of their participation in the electoral processes.

The 2021 elections revealed complex views of women protesters about the electoral system and the Iraqi Gender Quota System (GQS), reflecting the complications around the elections as a democratic process that runs under a hybrid state like Iraq⁶.

The debate on electoral participation was heated in 2021 with the emergence of a new class of Tishreen men and women politicians who ran for office. This pragmatic class of protesters decided to permeate the political system to achieve the reform they called for in the protest movement⁷. Standing for elections created a new paradigm in women's activism that sits on the intersectionality of social mobilization and political representation. Women succeeded in changing the electoral game of the 2021 round. Based solely on their votes, women secured 12 seats over the 83 designated for the GQS. Including 8 Tishreen women⁸, women were granted 95 seats, making female representatives this year (28.9%) of the parliament total.

This report argues that women's participation in Tishreen was organic, unfolding a variety of women's political interests, views, and capacities outside the influence of NGOs and CSOs. Second, Tishreen women's participation in the elections had remarkably impacted the elections' results. While their electoral roles reflected their political stances, Tishreen women achieved changes in the political scene post-Tishreen. Third, there are several gaps in the amended electoral law that impeded some Tishreen women's participation in the elections. The district-based new law limited the polling process to the residential districts, incapacitating threatened activists, men and women, from voting. Further, the zoning of

balloting into district-based constituencies reduced the selection process. Finally, women's political activism in Iraq is dangerous. Iraqi women activists and protesters have been working under an authoritarian climate, defying gender-bias restrictions, and gender-based violence. Nevertheless, women have been able to redirect the routes of their activism either by changing the means, or by indirectly being politically and electorally active.

As much as it is easy to enumerate the impediments that hinder women from being visible in the political domain, it might be more challenging to highlight and appreciate the positive changes brought by women through their consistent adaptation to the re-entrenchment of authoritarianism.



Basra

1 The women interviewed for the purpose of this report referred to the protest movement of 2019 as Tishreen, adjective would be Tishreeni.

2 Author interview with a woman protester from Basra [17/08/2021].

3 Ruba Ali Al-Hassani, "Maintaining the feminist spring of Iraq's October Revolution (Part III of III)", Inside Arabia, April 24, 2020, <https://insidearabia.com/maintaining-the-feminist-spring-of-iraqs-october-revolution-part-iii-of-iii/>.

4 Pasha Magid, "Women in Iraq defiantly take to the streets despite fears they 'could die at any moment'", Independent, November 23, 2019,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-protests-women-streets-death-torture-revolution-tahir-square-a9213976.html>.

5 BBC News, "Female Iraqi activist killed in Basra as gunmen target protesters", August 20, 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53847648>.

6 Zeinab Shuker, "The legitimacy crisis of traditional authority", Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, November, 2021, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/83yh3.pdf>.

7 Marsin Alshamary, "Protesters and civil society actors in Iraq: Between reform and revolution", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, December, 2020, <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Final%20protesters%20and%20Civil%20Society%208%20Dec%202020.pdf>.

8 Suadad Al-Salhy, "Iraq elections 2021: Tishreen movement becomes a political force in the south," Middle East Eye, October 15, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-elections-2021-how-tishreen-movement-became-political-force>.

This report is based on 43 semi-structured interviews with Iraqi women. The time limitation extended from mid-August until late November 2021. Female interviewees included key women protesters, women heads of NGOs and CSOs, women protesters-candidates from Baghdad, the newly elected female Member of Parliament (MP) Nissan Abdul-Redha Al-Salhy from Thi Qar who ran for Imtidad, and a female human-rights officer from the UN Women Iraq. The report also engaged with English and Arabic literature about Tishreen and gender politics in Iraq.

The geographical zones covered in this report were three provinces: Baghdad, Basra, and Thi Qar. While Baghdad was the capital and the locus of the Tishreen movement, it was imperative to investigate women's political and electoral views and attitudes in the under-researched provinces of Basra and Thi Qar. On the one hand, Basra has been the hot spot of social mobilization in Iraq since 2015, making women's activism a serious challenge under this chronic instability. Thi Qar, on the other side, incubated political parties that emerged from Tishreen, including Imtidad, and Al-Bait Al-Watani (The National Home), which secured 9 parliamentary seats in the latest elections. Further, Nissan Al-Salhy, from Imtidad, secured nearly 28,140 votes in the fourth district of Thi Qar. It was imperative to approach her experience as a female Tishreen MP.

The report begins by describing the revolutionary context of Tishreen and women's diversified roles they played in this protest movement. In order to understand Iraqi women's experience with the political and electoral process, the second section of the report will provide a broad historical background of Iraqi women's suffrage prior to 2003 followed by an elaboration of the Iraqi QQS post-2003. The first major section of the report will focus on the limitations of the new electoral law in regard to women's electoral participation. The second major section will be a gender analysis of the electoral process, shedding light on Tishreen women as candidates, voters and boycotters, and electoral observers. The final part will provide feasible recommendations to enhance women's empowerment in the political and electoral processes.

GENDERING TISHREEN NARRATIVE

In 2019, the longest anti-government protest post-2003 erupted in Baghdad and extended to the central and southern provinces. Unlike previous protests, this social movement was leaderless, spontaneous, and youth-orientated. Young people took to the streets decrying an ongoing structural violence exemplified by the lack of basic services, and the endemic corruption. Tishreen's demands evolved from civil grievances to incorporate political claims, some of which were revolutionary and called for the overthrow of the post-2003 political class, others were reformist that suggested constitutional amendments.

Tishreen quickly gained public countenance specifically when the pacifist demonstrations were met with brutal violence.



Baghdad

Nearly 600 people were killed, 22,000 were injured, and 15,000 were forcibly disappeared⁹. Despite these high numbers of casualties, Tishreen succeeded in unseating Adil Abdel-Mahdi's government, adjusting the electoral law, and bringing the elections to a closer date.

Women's enmeshed participation in Tishreen came in response to its different nature. The leaderless movement created a sentiment of belonging and inclusion among young men and women. For this reason, the prolonged presence of women in the three demonstration zones: Al-Tahrir in Baghdad, Al-Habuby in Thi Qar, and Al-Bahriya in Basra was shored-up by male protesters. Watching women chanting side by side with men embodied the type of life a younger generation wants to live where gender conservative codes disappear, and freedom of expression is equally practiced by men and women. A young woman protester from Thi Qar says:

"We looked at young male protesters, they were armless, topless, and ready to die at any minute. I was ashamed of myself while I was looking at them how hopeless they become that their lives do not matter. One of them told me: 'I am not alive; I am just not dead. This is not the life I want to lead, so I am ready to die'. How can we see them end their lives and we stand still watching? We should be there for them"¹⁰.

Women who occupied the protest zones performed a revolutionary act that embodied women's right in reclaiming public spaces that for long have been militarized, thus, masculinized. Basra, for example, is described by women, interviewed for the purpose of this report, as the city of tribes, armed factions, and pro-Iranian militias that orchestrate the social and political life in the oil-rich, but disenfranchised city; "I see Basra as a lawless city, "dysfunctioning" under the rule of armed factions, and tribes¹¹". Another woman interviewee who took part in previous protests prior to Tishreen confirms:

⁹ UNAMI, "Update on demonstrations in Iraq: Accountability for human rights violations and abuses by unidentified armed elements", May 15, 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_Report_Accountability_for_Human_Rights_Violations_and_Abuses_ENG.pdf.

¹⁰ Author interview with a woman protester from Thi Qar [09/09/2021].

¹¹ Author interview with a woman protester from Basra [18/08/2021].

“We [women] need to be visible, otherwise Basri women activism will come to an end soon under the tribal rule”¹². These fears correlated with what a Tishreen young female student from Thi Qar sees as a restriction of her activism:

“Our presence in Al-Habuby square was minimal due to the dangerous circumstances and the regular attacks on the square. We could not be present for 24 hours in the square, as in Baghdad, we were under social pressure; defamation and dishonoring”¹³.

Tishreen women from Basra and Thi Qar, specifically, talked about how difficult it is to defy patriarchy in their provinces due to tribal dominance. Tribalization of southern provinces predated 2003. Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party had extended the authority of the Iraqi clans and tribes to cover the “vacuum that stemmed from the destruction of civil society institutions and the decline of the state as a provider of security and social services”¹⁴. Post-2003, politico-sectarian elites empowered the tribes through armament and securing high positions in the province¹⁵, the power of the tribe in some cases might exceed that of the law¹⁶. The rise and sustainability of this armed patriarchal force initiated social classes, patterns of life and gender codes. Basri women’s mobility outside educational, professional, and domestic purposes is restricted. Hence, watching women vocalizing grievances, and protesting against political corruption became a manifestation of breaching tribal codes. One of the Tishreen women from Basra says:

“The idea to see women-led protests defied the Basri patriarchal city, even if we keep silent, the scene itself is revolutionary. I received a threat because I participated in Tishreen. I fled the city, but I came back for one day. It was the International Women’s Day, on the 8th of March 2021. Women’s activism in Basra should continue. I organized, with the collaboration of other women protesters, a silent march. We decided to keep silent, to say nothing, we raised signs condemning domestic violence, and the Penal Code’s Articles 128 and 398¹⁷. After this march, I received another death threat this time it included my family, that we should leave otherwise we will be all killed”¹⁸.

Not only did these incidents unfold the re-entrenchment of authoritarian governance in Iraq post-2003 but they revealed how violence against women is instrumentalized by the armed forces with full impunity.

A middle-aged woman protester and a member in Al-Bait Al-Watani party¹⁹ from Baghdad said that she was about to be kidnapped when she went out from Al-Tahrir square at night:

“There was a minibus waiting outside Al-Tahrir, I got in without thinking that the passengers were gangs. They started talking loudly about a group of young women kidnapped and kept in a small house in one of Baghdad’s old streets. I knew they were loud to make me hear their conversation and that meant that I might be next if I did not stop going to Al-Tahrir”²⁰.

These horrific experiences of those women, and maybe hundreds or thousands of other Tishreen women, formed their attitudes towards the electoral process, specifically that early elections were one of the urgent demands of Tishreen.

GENDER-BASED DEMANDS IN TISHREEN

Men and women took to the streets demanding fair employment opportunities, improvement of the civil services, and a serious approach to end corruption, impunity and foreign intervention. Nuancing this nearly-perfect image of gender coexistence, there were moments when there was a clear absence of a women’s rights agenda in Tishreen. Although Iraqi women are considered within the most vulnerable social classes who are highly exploited under the current corrupted system²¹, women’s rights were tepidly mentioned in Tishreen. There were several tents run by women in Baghdad, providing paramedic services and organizing the logistics flow, but women’s political agendas were silhouetted by that of men. A middle-aged women protester from Baghdad says that:

“We were more concerned about our young people’s safety, and we fully supported their demands as they were our demands also”²².

Women’s claims were embedded in the males’ nationalistic demands²³. It was not until Muqtada Al-Sadr tweeted on the 8th of February 2020 criticizing the gender mix in the protests’ tents, women, then, responded by organizing huge marches across provinces called “The Pink and Purple Protest”²⁴. That feminist protest raised slogans highlighting the importance of women’s protesting voices, including “your voice is a revolution, not a shame”, and “we are your daughters, my homeland”²⁵.

Most women interviewees deemed protests’ spaces a miniature of an imagined Iraq where women are granted full equity and justice.

12 Author interview with a woman protester from Basra [17/08/2021].

13 Author interview with a woman protester from Thi Qar [10/10/2021].

14 Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, (2009). What kind of liberation? Women and the occupation of Iraq, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

15 Ali Taher Alhmoud, “Behind Events in Basra: Problems and Possible Solutions,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, February 2019, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/17186.pdf>.

16 Adnan Abu Zeed, “Iraqi Tribes Slowly become ‘a state within a state’”, Al-Monitor, February 10, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/02/iraqi-tribes-armament-state-within-state.html>.

17 Article 128 mitigates sentences for honor killings, and Article 398 mitigates sentences by giving rapists the option to be cleared of all charges upon marrying their victim according to the Iraqi Constitution https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en (accessed 1st December 2021).

18 Author interview with a woman protester from Basra [17/08/2021].

19 Al-Bait Al-Watani is one of the political parties that emerged from Tishreen in Thi Qar. The party withdrew from the electoral race prior to the elections.

20 Author interview with a female member of Al-Bait Al-Watani from Baghdad [11/09/2021].

21 Ruba Ali Al-Hassani, “Corruption and exploitation of gender in Iraq (Part I of III)”, Inside Arabia, March 27, 2020, <https://insidearabia.com/corruption-and-exploitation-of-gender-in-iraqi-part-i-of-iii/>.

22 Author interview with a woman protester from Baghdad [10/09/2021].

23 The Academic Research Institute in Iraq – TARI, “Women and the Iraqi uprising webinar”, YouTube, February 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XlCjCSMae8&t=3663s>.

24 Hadeel Abdelhameed, “The pink and purple protest: Iraqi women invert the gender game”, Australian Institute of International Affairs, April 1, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-pink-and-purple-protest-iraqi-women-invert-the-gender-game/>.

25 Zahra Ali, “Women and the Iraqi revolution”, Jadaliyya, March 13, 2020, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40817>.



Baghdad

“The square was our home, we did our best to make it ideal, clean, organized, and safe. We did not think of being harassed or not, and we were not, simply because anyone of us could be shot in any minute, we focused on sustaining Al-Tahrir and protecting each other”²⁶.

Hundreds of stories talked about numerous collaborations between men and women that went beyond established norms, showing that these gender barriers, like other divisive mechanisms, were created to keep Iraqis segmented. However, this art of living and these ethics of companionship were exclusively experienced inside protest squares and demonstration zones. Outside these spaces, “life went back to normal where I should ask for permission to talk or express my view at home²⁷” as a female student from Thi Qar says.

Tishreen was one of the historical moments when patriarchy was partly suspended²⁸, outside the time and space of Tishreen, gender inequality was reactivated under the pressure of traditional authorities. It seemed, then, that women’s presence in Tishreen was for sustainable reasons, their political views and demands were side-lined which reflected the general status quo. Women are not seen as politically active; they are deemed within socially prescribed roles and spaces where their political views are not taken seriously. This notion is not limited to micropolitics, rather it is practiced at the macro-politics level, and normalized within the social contract in Iraq. In August 2015, the former PM Haidar Al-Abadi cancelled the Ministry of Woman as part of his national plan to fight corruption²⁹. The Ministry was reduced to The Committee of Woman, Childhood and Family. Three years later, on the 6th of September 2018, the parliament ratified merging

the committee of Human Rights, and The Committee of Woman, Childhood and Family under one committee, claiming that these institutes share a similar agenda³⁰. Not only do these laws have a reductionist influence on women’s political representation in the government but they embedded the politico-patriarchal vision that underestimates women-based legislative bodies. This side-lining discourse is reflected also in Tishreen.

In Thi Qar, the scenario was different. Despite the dangerous status quo, women protesters were preparing plans to activate the National Action Plan (2000)³¹. A leftist woman protester and a head of an established NGO from Thi Qar confirmed that she, and other leftist women activists, had been excluded from post-Tishreen dialogue:

“Women did not participate in the negotiations after October, although our demands were ready for submission under our label as Tishreen women. We prepared a national plan, and we are constantly working on developing different paths for women’s empowerment. The concluding days of Tishreen in Thi Qar witnessed self-fragmentation. They thought that our role in the square was to provide food and clean up. Male protesters did not believe in our political ability, even though there were among us a number of women activists with a distinctive history of political activism”³².

Whether the exclusion of this leftist woman protester, and her NGO, from taking part in the post-Tishreen negotiations was due to her gender, or due to her leftist-driven views, this marginalization indicates a continuation of a gender-bias discourse. That Tishreen woman, and through her NGO, continued elections’ mobilization by providing training workshops about electoral observation for women activists. She asserted that:

“The NGO collaborated with the IHEC [Independent High Electoral Commission] to train women activists to be local electoral observers. Our electoral training was not limited to electoral observation, I made sure to reach several Youth Forums to deliver short seminars explaining the new electoral law, and educating them of the importance of elections”³³.

Women continued to be politically active post-Tishreen, educating about the electoral process became another form of mobilization for the elections.

“They thought that our role in the square was to provide food and clean up. Male protesters did not believe in our political ability, even though there were among us a number of women activists with a distinctive history of political activism.”

26 Author interview with a woman protester from Baghdad [12/11/2021].

27 Author interview with a young woman protester from Thi Qar [10/10/2021].

28 The Academic Research Institute in Iraq – TARI, “Women and the Iraqi uprising webinar”.

29 Deutsche Welle, “العراقي يبدأ إصلاحاته بإلغاء ودمج عدد من الوزارات” (Al-Abadi begins his reforms by cancelling and merging a number of ministries), August 15, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/ar>.

30 Sara Al-Qahar, “مجتمع النسوي في العراق يشكو من عدم التمثيل في الحكومة والبرلمان” (The feminist community in Iraq complains about the lack of representation in the government and parliament), Al-Monitor, January 4, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/ar/contents/articles/originals/2019/01/iraq-women-feminism-gender-quality.html>.

[31] Peacewomen, “Iraq: National action plans (2013-2018)”, December, 2020, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Iraqs-National-Action-Plan-for-the-Implementation-of-UNSCR-1325-Women-Peace-and-Security-2014-2018.pdf>.

32 Author interview with a woman protester from Thi Qar [20/09/2021].

33 Ibid.

IRAQI WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE PREDATING 2003

In order to understand Tishreen women's participation in the elections, it is important to situate it within the context of women's political and electoral involvement. Iraqi women obtained the right to vote in 1980³⁴, making Iraq the 43rd in the world, and the 14th among Arab countries granting this right to women citizens³⁵. In the same year, the Iraqi National Council was established with 250 seats, and for the first time in Iraq, women were allowed to be part of the electoral process through voting and running for office. Women won 16 out of 250 seats, about 6.4%, and the elected female MPs were exclusively members of the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW)³⁶. The number of women representatives in the National Council deteriorated during Al-Ba'ath havoc times³⁷. In 1985, the number of female MPs reached 33, winning 13.2% of the seats in the Iraqi National Council³⁸. The elections post Iraq-Iran war that took place in April 1989, witnessed a decline in the popularity of the GFIW. Women won 27 seats (10.8%) that year, indicating the low turnout of Iraqi women in support of GFIW women who ran for the office³⁹. The following 14 years, including the 13 years of the economic sanctions (1990-2003), witnessed a dramatic drop in the number of female representatives in the National Council. Post the First Gulf War, the Iraqi parliamentary elections were postponed twice (1993 and 1995), it was carried out in 1996, granting only 17 seats for women representatives. The last elections held in Iraq prior to the US-led invasion was in 2000. The low turnout of women in that elections was mentioned in the official media to be the worst since Iraqi women were granted enfranchisement⁴⁰. Out of the 22 women who ran for the office, only 20 (7.2%) managed to secure seats. Two significant women out of the 20 elected were Dr. Rihab Rasheed Taha, the famous microbiologist, and Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, professor of microbiology at Baghdad University and the only female member in The Iraqi Command Council RCC.

The economic embargo, the continuous political oppression, and the deteriorated women's status due to tribo-patriarchal dominance, marginalized the GFIW inside the governing apparatus. The significant low turnout among women was considered as a form of passive resistance⁴¹.

The last few years of Al-Ba'ath rule, Saddam Hussein was aware of the potential rivals inside the political elite of Al-Ba'ath, he found it necessary for his supportive body to include primordial ties⁴². Iraqi women Members of Parliament (MP) were elected according to their social groups and laqab (family name), and their contribution to the sustainability of the party⁴³. Involving Iraqi women in the electoral and political processes was nominal under the previous authoritarian regime. De jure, the Iraqi Provisional Constitution of 1970 and the Interim Constitution of 1990, Article 19 stated that all Iraqi citizens are equal before the law despite their sex, blood, language, social background, and religion⁴⁴. Further, Article 26 of the 1970 and 1990 Constitutions stated that freedom of expression, gathering, demonstrations and formation of political parties is guaranteed by the objectives of the constitution⁴⁵. Despite the direct non-discriminatory language and gender-equity references in these clauses, Article 19 lacked any indication of the mechanism that measures women's political participation. Chapter IV of the Constitution on the "Institutions of the Iraqi Republic" with its 4 Sections, and 25 Articles did not mention any gender quota provisions in the major structure of the Iraqi state⁴⁶. These de jure gaps indicated that women's political representation in the Iraqi state was descriptive rather than substantive. Huda Al-Tamim differentiates between these two quota terms by saying that:

While] descriptive representation is [about] simple increases in numbers of female representatives in the elected body, the substantive [is] the evaluation of those women's efficacy and achievements as political agents⁴⁷.

De facto, under the one-party rule, women MPs, as most MP men, were mobilized and co-opted for the regime maintenance⁴⁸.

“We were more concerned about our young people’s safety, and we fully supported their demands as they were our demands also.”

34 Human Rights Watch, "Background on women's status in Iraq prior to the fall of the Saddam Hussein government", hrw, n.d., <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/background/wrd/iraq-women.pdf>.

35 Judi Ellis, "When women got the right to vote in 50 countries," Stacker, November 27, 2021, <https://stacker.com/stories/4299/when-women-got-right-vote-50-countries>.

36 Huda Altemimi, (2019). Women and Democracy in Iraq. Gender, Politics and Nation-Building. UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

37 Achim Rohde, (2010). State-society relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing dictatorship. (SOAS/Routledge Studies on the Middle East).

38 Gina Chirillo and Caroline Roddey, "Gender analysis of Iraq's electoral and political process", International Foundation for Electoral System, October 31, 2019.

https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/gender_analysis_of_iraqs_electoral_and_political_process.pdf.

39 Achim Rohde, State-society relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing dictatorship.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Sakai Keiko, "Stubborn authoritarianism through the parliamentary system: The case of Iraq under the Ba'thi regime", Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies, Vol. 24, no.1, 2008.

43 Ibid.

44 Kelly Fleck, Sawzan Gharaibeh, Aline Matta and Yasmine Rassam, "The status of women in Iraq, an assessment of Iraqis de Jure, and de facto compliance with international legal standards", Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, July 1, 2005, https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/hr_statusofwomeniniraq_aba_july2005_0.pdf.

45 IrefWorld, "Iraq: Interim Constitution", UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 1990, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4ec44.html>.

46 Kelly Fleck, Sawzan Gharaibeh, Aline Matta and Yasmine Rassam, "The status of women in Iraq, an assessment of Iraqis de Jure, and de facto compliance with international legal standards".

47 Huda Al-Tamimi, (2019). Women and democracy in Iraq, gender, politics and nation-building.

48 Sakai Keiko, "Stubborn authoritarianism through the parliamentary system: The case of Iraq under the Ba'thi regime", Annals of Japan Association of Middle East Studies.

Vol. 24, no. 1, 2008.

IRAQI GENDER QUOTA SYSTEM POST-2003

"I cannot see myself, or my generation, in the women representatives of the GQS. They are far away from women's daily life. The way they talk, dress, and think does not represent me. I saw some of them in public appearances, they fail to express their own ideas! How can they vocalize and support my rights, then?!" A young woman protester from Basra said⁴⁹.

One of the early acts of Iraqi women's activism shortly after the US-led invasion was the introduction of the GQS and the lobbying against the replacement of the personal status code with Sharia law.

The GQS was strongly opposed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)⁵⁰, it was only achieved and granted due to Iraqi women's mobilization and lobby⁵¹. The CPA declined a demand presented by a group of Iraqi women activists in late 2003 to allocate women to form at least one-third of the committee drafting the constitution and also of the council of the representatives and local councils⁵². The US did not plan for a women quota in post-conflict Iraq, rather it had a very broad development program to empower women through democracy training, and funding women's organizations. The women quota went through stages and compromises⁵³ to be eventually drafted as follows:

The Electoral Law, Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 96 – Section 4 (3) – states: No fewer than 1 out of the first 3 candidates on the list must be a woman, no fewer than 2 out of the first 6 candidates on the list must be a woman and so forth until the end of the list⁵⁴.

De jure, Iraq was brought into compliance with international conventions, in 2005, that grant women's rights to vote and to run for office. Even though there are several loopholes in the electoral laws that have been issued and then updated since 2005⁵⁵, women succeeded in securing seats outside the GQS. De facto, in the following electoral rounds post-2003, Iraqi women have been involved in political and electoral processes through voting and running for public office. Iraq quantitatively fares well in terms of women's political representation, it seconds the UAE, among Arab countries, in the number of women representatives⁵⁶. Having said that, several feminist academics and political analysts consider women's political representation within the Iraqi GQS a descriptive representation that is minimized to a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, level⁵⁷. This observation correlates with a comprehensive report published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in 2007, covering more than 11

countries across the globe. It elucidates that, globally, women barely hold 16% of the parliamentary seats, and that they are excluded from the decision-making positions by the patriarchal culture of politics⁵⁸. Further, women, even in established democratic countries, still suffer from the masculine model of politics that dominates the political arena and decision-making process. Men politicians still shape the political domain in accordance with "competition and confrontation, rather than on systemic collaboration and consensus especially across party line"⁵⁹, forcing female partisans to follow rather than to cooperate.

The Iraqi GQS is not an exception. As it is introduced to the Iraq political system and social-gender life, GQS suffers from pitfalls, the co-option by male leaders and partisans is the most evident one. A leftist woman protester serving as the head of an NGO from Thi Qar explains that "leaders of political parties prefer to present semi-illiterate women partisans in their parties, they are much easier to be controlled"⁶⁰.

Apparently, the political patriarchy inside the parliament had also restricted women representatives from supporting Tishreen, and Tishreen women in particular. A young woman protester from Baghdad talked about the indifference of female MPs towards women protesters saying that:

*"Women representatives in the parliament knew about the violations against women protesters, they did not even denounce these violations, they did not approach us in the protest squares to listen to our demands, or even to check on us"*⁶¹.

The indifference of female MPs towards the recurrent incidents of violence that targeted women protesters also embedded their lack of political will to pass the anti-domestic violence law. The bills currently waiting to be ratified are 'Protection from Domestic Violence' from the Council of Ministers and 'Combating Domestic Violence' from the President's Office. Both were rejected three times since they were submitted in 2015⁶². Politico-patriarchy succeeded in subjugating women parliamentarians and holding for nearly eight years these two anti-domestic violence bills. Lina Al-Musawi showed that the parliamentary round (2018-2021) was the most inactive round since post-invasion, she explains:

One of the main reasons that hinder passing laws is that the Parliament sessions were not completed in the presence of all its 329 members. During the four years, the attendance of sessions barely reached 170 MPs. In order to ratify a bill, 220 (⅔) MPs, at least, should vote for it. That is why nearly 60 bills have not been passed among which is the anti-domestic violence bill⁶³.

49 Author interview with a women protester from Basra [18/09/2021].

50 Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What a kind of liberation? Women and occupation in Iraq.

51 Nicola Pratt, "Women's political participation in post-invasion Iraq", Consortium Lecture, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, November 20, 2006, https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/nicola_pratt_consortium_lecture_11-20-2006.pdf.

52 Annia Ciezadlo, "Iraqi women raise voices – for quotas", The Christian Science Monitor, December 17, 2003, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1217/p01s02-woiq.html>.

53 Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What a kind of liberation? Women and occupation in Iraq.

54 International IDEA, "Women quotas in Iraq," University of Sweden, January, 2005, <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/mideast/IQ/Women%20Quotas%20in%20Iraq.pdf>.

55 Gina Chirillo and Caroline Roddey, "Gender analysis of Iraq's electoral and political process", International Foundation for Electoral System, October 31, 2019, https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/gender_analysis_of_irags_electoral_and_political_process.pdf.

56 Ibid.

57 Huda Altemimi, Women and democracy in Iraq: Gender, politics and nation-building.

58 Julie Ballington and Azza Karam, "Women in parliament: Beyond numbers, a revised edition", International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, September 13, 2017, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/women-parliament-beyond-numbers-revised-edition?lang=ar>.

59 Ibid.

60 Author interview with a woman head of NGO from Thi Qar [25/08/2021].

61 Author interview with a female undergraduate from Baghdad [30/10/2021].

62 Taif Al-Khudary, Marwa Ridah, Anfal Abed and Amal Kabashi, "Challenging narratives of fate and divine will: Access to justice for gender-based violence in Iraq", LSE Middle East, November, 2021, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112753/3/GBVinIraq.pdf>.

63 Lina Imad Al-Musawi, "Iraqi women candidates in the Iraqi parliamentary race 2021: A prospect runner-up and a weak competitor", Al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies, October 4, 2021, <https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/9876t1.pdf>.

THE QGS AND THE NEW ELECTORAL LAW

The fifth round of the Iraqi elections was expected to run in May 2022, however, and under the pressure of the Tishreen movement, it was rescheduled to the 10th of October 2021. The change in date also came with a change in the formulation of the electoral law that operates the general parliamentary elections, the local elections, and the organization of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). Rather than the province-based constituency, the new electoral law divides Iraq geographically into 83 district constituencies in reference to the minimum seat numbers of female representatives in the parliament. This step indicates that each electoral district should include at least one female candidate to achieve the 25% of gender quota in the legislative body. In addition, the amended law introduces the Single Non-Transferable Vote system (SNTV) which enables electorates to vote for a candidate above party or bloc preference⁶⁶. Another adjustment demanded by the Tishreen movement was to reduce the age of candidacy to which the new law responded by minimizing the age of candidates from 30 to 28 (it was 25 in the first law draft)⁶⁷, in an attempt to conciliate the protesters who called for young representatives in the parliament.

WHAT IS NEW FOR WOMEN IN THE 2021 ELECTIONS?

This round of elections came with a bundle of laws and initiatives to empower women candidates, along with logistic support to facilitate women's electoral experience. In response to the electoral violence and violations against women candidates that took place in the 2018 elections, the General Secretariat of The Council of Ministers initiated the Department of Women's Empowerment (DWE) in 2020. The initiative has been also inaugurated as part of the National Action Plan to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security to which Iraq committed itself⁶⁸. The DWE started collaborating with a number of NGOs and CSOs, the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and the UN Women Iraq to facilitate women's empowerment during the 2021 elections. This strategy of gender mainstreaming came through legislative, executive and grassroots levels⁶⁹.

On the legislative level and in an attempt to bound the electoral violence targeting female candidates, the updated electoral law, under the Penal Provisions Chapter 8, Clause 35 stated that: Shall be punished by imprisonment for a period of not less than one month and not exceeding one year, or a fine of not less than



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1,000,000 dinars and not more than 500,000 dinars or both those who:

First: Deliberately assaulting the pictures of the candidates or their programs published in the assigned places for another candidate or a specific entity with the intent to harm this candidate or to hurdle the conduct of the electoral process.

[...]

Third: Attacking the legally permitted means of electoral propaganda for any reason whether by writing off, tearing up, or else, or any such act⁷⁰.

Responding to this legislation, the UN Women Iraq in collaboration with the IHEC started to archive the complaints received from women candidates who experienced electoral violence. Compared to the 2018 elections, there were few serious electoral violence cases practiced against female candidates this round⁷¹.

On the grassroots level, a cohort of NGOs and CSOs were assigned to provide training courses and workshops that would help female candidates build-up their capacities to enable them to compete in the elections⁷². Three of the women protesters and NGO heads interviewed for this report asserted that their organizations carried out more than 4-6 elections-based events directed to women candidates and electorates since February 2021. One NGO head in Thi Qar explained that her organization, one of the early NGOs established post-2003, presented two workshops collaboratively with the Secretariat General in Thi Qar, focusing on introducing the skills and capacities needed for public appearance, political debates, and the electoral process. Nearly 165 women candidates attended these (virtual and face-to-face) events. Furthermore, NGOs and CSOs from Baghdad ran multiple workshops, targeting the public and inviting women, to explain the new electoral law and the electoral process itself, including how to update the biometric voting cards.⁷³

66 Victoria Stewart-Jolley, "Iraq's electoral system", Chatham House, 6 October, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/iraqs-electoral-system/two-major-changes>.

67 Omar Al-Jaffal, "Iraq's new electoral law: Old powers adapting to change", Arab Reform Initiative, 12 January 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/iraq-elections/>.

68 Peacewomen, "Iraq: National action plans (2013-2018)", December, 2020, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Iraqs-National-Action-Plan-for-the-Implementation-of-UNSCR-1325-Women-Peace-and-Security-2014-2018.pdf>.

69 UN Women Iraq, "The national security adviser starts training programs for women candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections", July 1, 2021, <https://iraq.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/07/national-security-adviser-training-programs>.

70 Iraqi Ministry of Justice, "مؤدري قارعة لباوندنا سرلجم تالباغتنا زنوناق" (Electoral law No. 9 of 2020 for the parliamentary elections), Iraqi Events, 9 November 2020, <https://moj.gov.iq/view/5200/>.

71 Author interview with a UN human rights officer from Baghdad [15/10/2021].

72 General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, "ارزولا سرلجم قارعة لباوندنا زنوناق" (The Department of Women Empowerment in the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers launches a plan to support women's political participation in the parliamentary elections), <http://www.cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=11376->

73 Author interview with women protesters and NGO members from Thi Qar, Baghdad and Basra [09, 10, 11/11/2021].

Women activists were also part of the observational bodies that oversaw the electoral process. A women protester and a prominent member of the Tammuz Organization stated that the NGO provided several training sessions in collaboration with the IHEC across provinces. The interviewee asserted that “we made sure to invite young women to take part in the training program to be local observers⁷⁴”. Finding young women as local observers was considered a valid step that helped restore trust in the integrity of the electoral process.

A standpoint should be mentioned here, all three NGO heads confirmed that low numbers of women participation were reported in the events directed to the public. The head of a NGO from Baghdad sadly mentioned that her organization focuses on spreading awareness about political rights among young people:

“All topics discussed, and workshops presented are mainly to cover political issues, male attendance outnumbered that of females every time. I have to send formal invitations to prominent women activists to join the public, and they do, otherwise, female attendees are very rare”⁷⁵.

These concerns are echoed by a middle-aged women activist and a CSO head from Thi Qar who explained that the only way she can grant a large number of women attendees to the events run by her CSO is through collaboration with other governmental institutions:

“I need to collaborate with Youth Forums that usually provide workshops and Job Fairs to young people. I am notified with the date of the event run by the Youth Forum, and I will join the event near the end. I have to ask the attendees to stay for some extra minutes to introduce the topic of the electoral process, for example, and they usually stay, but not for long, and some prefer to leave”⁷⁶.

Several reasons might be behind this disinterest in political education, it is mainly attributed to the violence that targeted Tishreen protesters, including women, which made a considerable number of them redirect their interests towards civil society activities. A young journalist and protester from Baghdad said that:

“I need to follow the news, and attend workshops and panels that provide political education, it is part of my job. I understand where those women come from, they are indifferent as they see how being politically active might cause troubles. They would prefer to focus on building up their capacities to find job opportunities rather than being involved in menacing activities”⁷⁷.

This political apathy among some young women might be also justified by a combination of factors. Iraqi political context, like

any other regional country, follows a patriarchal system. Politics is considered a males’ business, pushing women to the peripheries of this arena. Additionally, and more importantly, involvement in politics among young people requires freedom of expression and the ability to evaluate political agendas, figures, and ideologies which becomes extremely dangerous post-Tishreen⁷⁸.

TISHREEN WOMEN CANDIDATES

“We (the public) usually criticize people in power who have been neglecting people’s grievances. Imtidad will exchange roles, we uphold this responsibility, and we will see whether providing services to our people is challenging or not”, says Nissan Al-Salhy⁷⁹.

This year, 951 female candidates ran for the office, 162 of them were independents^[80]. Although this number is nearly half that in 2018, which was 1800 female candidates, this year female MPs secured 97 seats for the first time in Iraq since women were granted suffrage. Tishreen women also ran for office, specifically in Baghdad and the Southern provinces including Basra, Thi Qar, Babel, and Qadisiya, vying against female MPs from established parties. Most of those women protesters-candidates were standing for elections under a ruthlessly competitive environment. Generally, women candidature is persistently challenging not only within the Arab region but also worldwide⁸¹. During the elections, there are key boundaries that restrict women’s political involvement in the parliaments, extending from the political, and social barriers to financial constraints.

The Iraqi electoral climate becomes fierce near elections as established parties manipulate all types of capitals to secure as many seats as they can. Usually, in this “dirty game” of politics, women are commonly targeted⁸². Using electoral violence to subject female candidates succeeded in keeping several women out of the electoral race. One of Tishreen women candidates interviewed for this report affirmed that:

“I was attacked several times since I started my candidacy through dishonoring me and my family, labelling me as ‘a whore’, and I am sure that these accusations will escalate as the date of elections draws near”⁸³.

“They thought that our role in the square was to provide food and clean up. Male protesters did not believe in our political ability, even though there were among us a number of women activists with a distinctive history of political activism.”

73 Author interview with women protesters and NGO members from Thi Qar, Baghdad and Basra [09, 10, 11/11/2021].

74 Author interview with a woman protester and NGO member from Thi Qar [21/11/2021].

75 Author interview with a young NGO head from Baghdad [12/11/2021].

76 Author interview with a young NGO head from Thi Qar [27/09/2021].

77 Author interview with a woman journalist and protester from Baghdad [15/10/2021].

78 Hadeel Abdelhameed and Mariam Hassoun, “To think is to dream: An Iraqi perspective”, 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, November 26, 2021, <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2021/11/26/to-think-is-to-dream-an-iraqi-perspective/>.

79 Author interview with Nissan Al-Salhi, a newly-appointed MP and a female member of Imtidad from Thi Qar [05/12/2021].

80 UNAMI, “Iraq’s electoral preparations and processes report No. 10”, reliefweb, August 11, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNAMI%20Report%20No.%2010%20on%20Iraq%27s%20Electoral%20Preparations%20and%20Processes%202021%20-%20Final.pdf>.

81 Julie Ballington and Azza Karam, “Women in parliament: Beyond numbers, a revised edition”, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, September 13, 2017, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/women-parliament-beyond-numbers-revised-edition?lang=ar>.

82 Ibid.

83 Author interview with a women protester-candidate from Baghdad [01/10/2021].

Post-2003, women's public activities were scrutinized due to a complex matrix of restrictions, reinforcing traditional gender codes that still consider women as embodiment of the family honor. Defaming women protesters-candidates is a continuation of a systematic attack against Tishreen women. Zahra Ali sees that subjugating Tishreen came also through dishonoring women "to disqualify the uprising on the basis of it being 'immoral' and a breach of societal and religious norms"⁸⁴.

Further, coming from Tishreen signifies women's oppositional stance to the established political class. For this reason, Tishreen women candidates were put under dual pressures of temptation and/or intimidation to demit electoral candidature. Nissan Abdul-Redha Al-Salhy stated that:

"I received several threats and offers to withdraw from the candidacy, which was anticipated, I do also expect that this approach will continue when I start my role as a MP"⁸⁵.

Another impediment that can directly impact women's standing for elections is the financial capacity. Women need to mobilize resources, and logistics to support, and sustain, their campaigns, specifically independent candidates. Jihan Al-Tai, a women protester-candidate who ran for office in Baghdad asserted that one of the main challenges she faced was the financial means that she found prohibitively expensive⁸⁶. The new electoral law did not adjust the registration fees of the IHEC for the newly established parties. Nearly 30 million Iraqi dinars should be posited for registering a new party, and another 10 Iraqi million dinars to be paid by each candidate to enter the elections, which is definitely beyond the financial capacity of these new parties⁸⁷.

Despite campaigning with a very tight budget⁸⁸, Imtidad, the newly formed political party that forged from Tishreen in Thi Qar, surprisingly, secured 9 seats in the parliament, including Nissan Abdul-Redha Al-Salhy, a woman candidate who, solely, secured more than 28,000 votes. Al-Salhy, a middle-aged primary school teacher, was one of four candidates who stood for elections in the Fourth District of Thi Qar. The geographical zone where Al-Salhy campaigned includes seven remote agricultural areas, based in the south of the province, comprising Marshes and rural districts. With a very low fund, Al-Salhy personally visited electorates in these remote areas. She asserted that:

"I was the only Tishreen candidate in the Fourth District, the other candidates were affiliated with established parties. I was the only hope of change in these areas despite the extreme conservative, and patriarchal climate, the voters chose a woman candidate over male runners for office"⁸⁹.

A quantitative survey, done by Al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies, reached nearly 3026 participants across Iraqi provinces three weeks prior to the elections. The results showed that 50.8% of male participants and 52.1% of female participants confirmed that they will not vote for the same candidate or party that they voted for in the previous election 2018.⁹⁰ The results subserved a political disillusionment with established political parties, and the need to see new faces in the decision-making positions, specifically the parliament. Elucidating this disaffection came through the "punitive vote"⁹¹ when electorates penalized entrenched parties for their misgovernance. Ali Taher Alhmoud explains this process by saying that:

The parties which lost in the elections thought that they still enjoyed popularity among the public. The reality is that post-Tishreen, the electorates are not after basic services, rather they are more concerned that their traditional authorities are the roots of the problem, and that whatever their grievances will be, they will be responded to by violent oppression rather than practical solutions⁹².

Electing a woman as the political representative of a rural and remote area has reclaimed trust in the electoral process and its integrity, confirming that elections are still the democratic path to bring change. Al-Salhy, – despite her gender, young age, limited budget, and lack of political history, aside from Tishreen – was elected because her district "wanted new people who might be able to address their grievances" as she puts it.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE; THAT IS THE QUESTION

Every time prior to the elections, the debate about the validity of voting dominates Iraqis' political discussions. The results of the previous electoral rounds entrenched the same corrupt political class and proved wrong those who hoped for some change through elections. This has been evident through the low turnout of the 2021 elections that barely reached 44%⁹³, reflecting a public political apathy despite the late call of the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani who urged Iraqi voters to turn out for the elections⁹⁴.

Most women protesters who were interviewed for the purpose of this report, even those who were willing to vote, expressed their reluctance towards the voting process, describing balloting as "the best of other worst choices" to change the political class. A 21-year old female student from Basra university describes her decision:

84 Zahra Ali, "The 2019 Iraqi uprising and the feminist imagination," TNI, October 27, 2021, <https://longreads.tni.org/the-2019-iraqi-uprising-and-the-feminist-imagination>.

85 Author Interview with Nissan Abdul-Redha Al-Salhi, the newly-elected Tishreen woman from Thi Qar [05/12/2021].

86 Author interview with Jihan Al-Tai, a protester-candidate from Baghdad [13/10/2021].

87 Sajad Jiyad, "Protest vote: Why Iraq's next elections are unlikely to be game-changers", LSE, April 23, 2021, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110201/>.

88 The Arab Weekly, "With only few seats, Iraq's protest movement hopes to find a voice in parliament", November 3, 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/only-few-seats-iraqs-protest-movement-hopes-find-voice-parliament>.

89 Author interview with Nissan Al-Salhi, a newly-appointed MP for Imtidad from Thi Qar [05/12/2021].

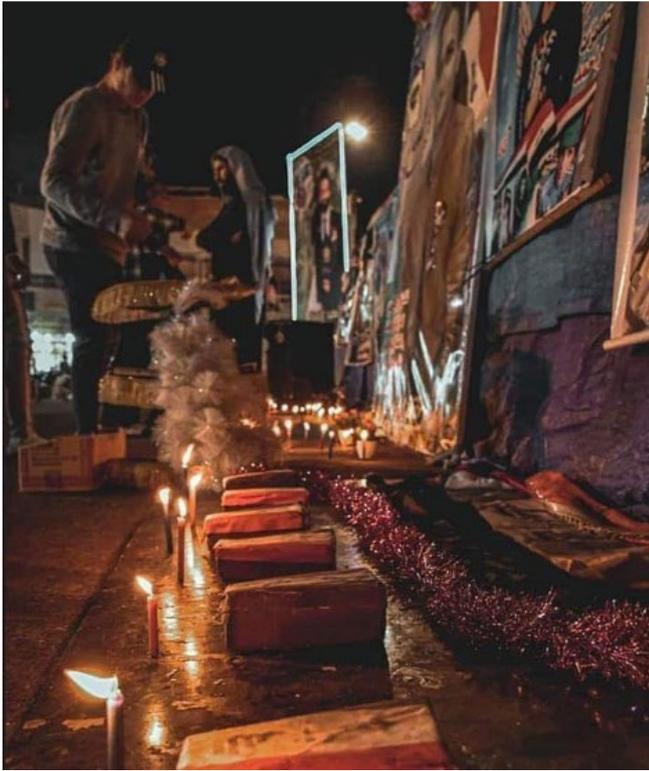
90 Editing and Research Department, "Parliamentary elections 2021 in Iraq (Survey)", Al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies, September 30, 2021, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/poll2021.pdf>.

91 Ali Taher Alhmoud, "Iraq's parliamentary elections 2021: The harsh lessons", Al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies, October 14, 2021, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/2021/10/2832/>.

92 Ibid.

93 France 24, "نسبة المشاركة تبلغ 41% في الانتخابات التشريعية العراقية" (Voter turnout 41% in Iraqi elections), France24, October 11, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/ar/-/IHEC-puts-the-official-turnout-at-43.52%>.

94 Shia News Association, "سماعة السيد السيستاني يثبغ العراقيين على المشاركة في الانتخابات القادمة" (His eminence Al-Sistani encourages Iraqis to participate in the upcoming elections), September 29, 2021, <https://ar.shafaqna.com/AR/>.



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"I have been thinking for long whether to vote or not, specifically after the assassination of Ihab Al-Wazni⁹⁵, then I decided that there is no use in legitimizing this government by participating in the elections. I had long discussions with other male and female protesters. Boycotting the elections meant letting down our friends and mates who were killed in Tishreen. Didn't they demand early elections? But what if the same faces will be recycled? That was not an easy decision. Eventually, I decided that I will vote, it is the only way to bring change even on a narrow scale"⁹⁶.

The expressed views of Tishreen women interviewees revolved around the objectives of the elections, being one of the demands called for by Tishreen protesters. It is undeniable that Al-Kadhimi's government ratified early elections, and an amended electoral law (originally suggested by Tishreen), the electoral process itself was questioned. One of the women protesters from Baghdad was concerned that "there should be a solid international observational role, otherwise this election will be another fraud"⁹⁷.

While the supervisory role of the UN and other international bodies is mainly provided in a form of a technical assistance⁹⁸, the majority of the women protesters believed that the involvement of the UN might restore some trust in the election integrity. Another procedure implemented this year by the IHEC, the outdated

voters' card was replaced with a long-term biometric vote card, aiming at mitigating fraud and ensuring that voters would cast a single ballot⁹⁹.

Another factor that drove women protesters to consider voting is the call of the religious authorities, Al-Maraji'a, late September, nearly 10 days prior to the elections. For women protesters who are religiously devotees to Al-Maraji'a in Najaf, they followed the call of the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani who urged Iraqi voters to cast their ballot¹⁰⁰. A middle-aged woman protester from Thi Qar asserted that she and her family are going to vote despite the fact that she does not know the candidates in her residential district. Al-Maraji'a's call encouraged her further to vote, she will do research about the candidates and will choose the best¹⁰¹. However, the low turnout this year seemed to show that this obligation towards the traditional institution of the Shi'a sect¹⁰² was not wide in this round of the elections. Ali Taher Alhmoud anticipates that this decline in the influence of Al-Maraji'a might be a sign of a politico-religious apathy in the near future¹⁰³.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE NEW ELECTORAL LAW

Boycotting the System, not the Elections

Theoretically, amendments in the electoral law responded to Tishreen's demands, attempting to achieve a more open electoral system that delimits the power of the large and medium-sized parties, and provides a wider space to smaller, independent, and newly formed parties to access the parliament. Practically, the district-based electoral law created further complications and barriers for women protesters who called for it. The zoning of the electoral district limited the choices of protesters within their residential districts, restricting their electoral preferences as highlighted by a leftist women protester from Al-Bait Al-Watani party saying:

"I was one of the women protesters who pushed for the district-based electoral law. We thought that limiting the geographical area might encourage electorates to choose someone they know, and by this, we will be able to reduce the number of classic partisans. Now I, and many other protesters, regretted this decision. It was a big mistake that we did not realize until the

"I am not going to give my voice to candidates I do not trust"

95 Mina Aldroubi, "Iraq: The murder of activist Ihab Al-Wazni highlights widespread political killings", The National News MENA, May 10, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/iraq-the-murder-of-activist-ihab-al-wazni-highlights-widespread-political-killings-1.1219482>.

96 Author interview with a women protester from Basra [27/09/2021].

97 Author interview with a woman protester from Baghdad [07/11/2021].

98 Marsin Alshamari and Maya Nir, "Order from chaos: The prospects and limitations of United Nations election observation in Iraq", Brookings, May 3, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/03/the-prospects-and-limitations-of-united-nations-election-observation-in-iraq/>.

99 Javad Jarrahi, "Iraq replaces outdated biometric voter cards for 2021 election: Slow roll-out of new biometric voter ID raises concerns", Biometric Update, January 5, 2021, <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202101/iraq-replaces-outdated-biometric-voter-cards-for-2021-election>.

100 Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre, "ديار عراق: تباين نتائج الانتخابات العراقية 2021" (Possible scenarios for the Iraqi elections), October 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQIK0VZ2mQA>.

101 Author interview with a woman activist and head of the Youth Forums in Thi Qar [09/09/2021].

102 Zeinab Shuker, The Legitimacy Crisis of Traditional Authority.

103 Ali Taher Alhmoud, الانتخابات البرلمانية العراقية 2021: الدروس القاسية. (Iraqi parliamentary elections 2021: The harsh lessons).

parliament passed the new electoral law. I am not going to elect someone from the Al-Hikma party that dominates my residential district. I am not going to give my voice to candidates I do not trust"¹⁰⁴.

This geographical limitation was one of the reasons that encouraged many women protesters to boycott the elections despite their willingness to extend their street activism through contributing to the electoral process as constituents. However, those women protesters refuse to refer to their act as boycotting, rather they oppose the electoral process and its law in the current form, they still believe that elections are the only democratic way to achieve the change.

This group of women protesters-boycotters see that the current political class will continue regenerating itself. This is evident through the results of the last four elections that recycled the same parties, faces, and rhetoric. Further, this political class was entrenched through the violent techniques used to suppress social movements in 2011, 2015, 2018 and reached its peak in Tishreen. The only legitimate way to replace this political class should come through ballot boxes, considering this step as the only democratic right they can practice aside from demonstrations. Having said that, those women-protesters changed their minds in response to the limitations of the electoral system, the geographical distribution was one of them. A young women protester from Basra decided not to vote for her uncle who is running in her electoral district:

"I would prefer to vote for Mrs. Awatef Rasheed running for the second district of Basra. I attended most of her workshops and panels, she is the woman I would like to see in the parliament to represent me as a Basri young woman. Mrs. Awatef is open minded, educated, and is very supportive to women's issues. Unfortunately, I cannot. She is not within my residential district. Instead, there is my uncle, who is running for the Sadrist's, and I am not going to vote for him"¹⁰⁵.

Those women protesters believe that their votes should go to the right candidate, deeming that their experiences in the protest that endangered their safety, and in many cases, their honor, should eventuate into a political change:

"Since I am restricted by my choices within this district-based electoral system, I am not going to give my voice to any of the candidates in my area, I would rather go and cross my ballot form so that it cannot be counterfeited"¹⁰⁶.

"I received a text message via my cell phone on the same day that the late Reham Yacoub was assassinated. It read that I will be the next.."

INTIMIDATION AND SUPPRESSION OF FEMALE VOTERS AND CANDIDATES

The limited choices of the residential district have hindered several women protesters from voting. It was the first time that this amended electoral law was put into an application, it could be addressed in the coming vote when more suitable candidates will run for office. Having said that, another reason was behind boycotting the elections that needed serious intervention which was the forced displacement inside and outside Iraq also restricted women protesters' mobility to vote.

Since 2019 Tishreen, a considerable number of women protesters relocated to other provinces or decided to move outside Iraq due to concerns related to their personal and/or family security. Serial assassinations of several Basri prominent protesters including Dr. Reham Yacoub, Sara Talib and her husband, and others took place between 2019 and 2020¹⁰⁷, lethal attacks also included family members of women activists¹⁰⁸. Relocating from their provinces to another one, more specifically to the Northern provinces such as Sulaymaniyah, or Erbil, or heading outside Iraq, most likely to Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon, was the safest choice. Despite their willingness to participate in the elections as voters, the lack of electoral security incapacitated the participation of many women protesters:

"I received a text message via my cell phone on the same day that the late Reham Yacoub was assassinated. It read that I will be the next. There was no choice but to relocate [cries] I didn't want to leave; I wanted to stay and vote. Now, I cannot, why did we take to the street then? To run away? It is the time that we have been waiting post-Tishreen, to make the change, but I cannot be part of it while I am here"¹⁰⁹.

Electoral security was a common reason among women protesters who boycotted the elections, they kept hiding in their new locations due to the ongoing threats of armed forces. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and systemic assassinations continued to take place against protesters in Baghdad and southern provinces. Further, impunity enjoyed by armed auxiliaries has not come to an end. Several resources assert that government forces, including police and army forces, intelligence officers, and paramilitary members were involved in several types of violence against protesters¹¹⁰. Only few cases were reported about low-ranked military members, rather than senior commanders or chiefs, who were prosecuted¹¹¹. Despite the pressure of civil society¹¹², the security situation around protesters, specifically women, is still fragile.

104 Author interview with activist from Baghdad [10/10/2021].

105 Author interview with a women protester from Basra [27/09/2021].

106 Author interview with a women protester from Baghdad [17/10/2021].

107 European Asylum Support Office, "Iraq Protest Movement 2020," October, 2020, https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/10_2020_EASO_COI_Report_Iraq_The_protest_movement_and_treatment_of_protesters.pdf.

108 Azhar Al-Rubai, "Iraq: Son of prominent women's rights activist found shot dead near Basra," Middle East Eye, July 25, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-son-prominent-iraqi-rights-activist-shot-dead-near-basra>.

109 Author interview with a women protester from Basra [18/08/2021].

110 "Iraq protest movement 2020", European Asylum Support Office.

111 World Report 2021, "Iraq: events of 2020," Human Rights Watch, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/iraq>.

112 24 News Agency EN, "Iraq – Mothers of the October revolution victims hold a vigil in Tahrir square", November 19, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8_4NK5cHA0.

The inability to physically take part in the elections did not hinder young women from being politically and electorally active. In Basra, for example, a new women activists' network called "Basra Feminists" emerged from Tishreen, they organized themselves in virtual groups on social media that provided a safer space for them to continue activism¹¹³. Establishing cyberfeminist groups on Twitter and Clubhouse, as the heads believe, will help them and other forcibly relocated women protesters, to continue their activism online. The head of this group asserted that their experience in the 2019 protest was not to support or logistically sustain men protesters, rather their contribution was to lead the protest:

*"When the armed groups used to shoot the men protesters, we replaced their places, we continued to move toward the military force, then they stopped shooting. This form of protest is not sustaining the protest, rather it is a continuation and extension of it. Our presence in the protest spaces was an open message that there is a professional feminist activism in Basra despite the paramilitary persecution and patriarchy"*¹¹⁴.

Two of those young women were forcibly relocated inside Iraq, they needed to go back to Basra and specifically to their residential district, where they were threatened, in order to be able to vote. They could not vote eventually, that is why several women protesters saw the new electoral law, that Tishreen suggested, as "catastrophic". A female student from the Law School in Basra describes it:

*"My residential district is controlled by very big and powerful tribes; do you know what that means? Only male candidates will win, and eventually, our daily activities will be very restricted, if we have any form of freedom now, I am afraid we might not be able to enjoy some of it in the near future"*¹¹⁵.

The Need for Political Awareness among Female Voters and Candidates

The limitations of the updated electoral law indicated a lack of political experience among the protesters even among the reformists class. A prominent leftist women protester from Thi Qar who is also a member of Al-Bait Al-Watani embodied the strategy of her party in boycotting the elections. She decided not to vote, believing that she is not ready yet to be part of the polity. She lacks political history, tactics, and savviness as she describes it:

*"Although I decided not to vote, I mobilized people to vote in support of Imdad. My participation in the protest movement 2019 showed how it is important that women should be part of the political process. However, Al-Bait Al-Watani is not going to run for office this year, but it will for the next round in four years during which we will gain further political experience"*¹¹⁶.

Lacking "the political experience", as this woman protester refers to, becomes a serious concern among protesters-reformists, specifically women. Some of the female members in the political parties that emerged from Tishreen referred to the need for political experience to be able to rightly perform, believing that this might take years to be sharpened and shaped.

One of the young women activists from Baghdad, a graduate of the School of Political Sciences at the University of Baghdad, decided to establish a non-governmental organization that does not aim to serve women's rights, rather her NGO focuses on spreading political awareness among young people.

"I was part of the protest movement in 2019, and I noticed that revolutionary protesters failed to provide an alternative to this political class. Some reformists, on the other side, did not have a clear political vision of what would be the next step post-Tishreen? Some of them lacked a clear mechanism to establish opposition parties, others were unaware of the functioning strategies inside the parliament. I found this very dangerous"¹¹⁷. To this young graduate, political literacy should be implemented as a core subject in secondary schools and tertiary education, "otherwise, we will reproduce generations who are politically illiterate, and will not be able to stand for their rights"¹¹⁸. The absence of political and electoral literacy among young people, women in specific, was recurrently manipulated by established political parties. Close to elections, these parties work hard to provide public services to constituents, including paving the streets, or providing employment degrees. This type of electoral campaigning might succeed in mobilizing a good number of voters. Lina Imad Al-Musawi asserts that the reason behind the popularity of some senior parties is also due to the exploitation of the public confusion between the powers of the members of parliament and the members of the provincial council. Al-Musawi furthers that:

*"Five electoral experiences failed to raise awareness among electorates that the MPs have legislative and regulatory authority rather than executive power. This misunderstanding was negatively exploited by senior political parties which negatively influenced the democratic process in Iraq"*¹¹⁹.

This also has been evident with Tishreen women candidates whose electoral programs lacked a separate gender agenda that should elucidate their vision to empower women and grant gender equity. A Tishreen woman candidate from Baghdad interviewed for this report answered the question "what your priority would be if you are elected?" and her women's rights agenda came at the end of a long list she had in mind:

*"Lastly, I will focus on enacting the domestic violence laws and do my best to raise the gender quota because I see that 25% is not enough to politically represent women in the parliament"*¹²⁰.

113 See e.g. the Basra Feminist Team's Twitter account, https://twitter.com/basra_fem.

114 Author interview with a women protest and activist from Basra [11/11/2021].

115 Ibid.

116 Author interview with a women protest and activist from Thi Qar [20/11/2021].

117 Author interview with a women protester and activist from Baghdad [03/11/2021].

118 Ibid.

119 Lina Imad Al-Musawi, Iraqi women candidates in the Electoral Race 2021: A potential runner-up, and a weak competitor.

120 Author interview with a Tishreen woman candidate from Baghdad [01/10/2021].

Another independent Tishreen woman candidate duplicated similar campaign programs of other male candidates. She emphasized that her priority will be to “end impunity, and corruption, work to implement arms control and to support legislation related to the welfare system, and civic services”¹²¹

It is undeniable that women who are running for office in Iraq, and most likely in the Middle East and worldwide, are doing so within a patriarchal political system where candidates and constituents are mainly men. Accordingly, the campaign programs presented by female candidates speak to this men-dominant climate by duplicating their male peers’ propagandas. Julie Bollington and Azza Karam postulate that:

Patriarchy, subordination of women, and the deep-rooted perception that the public domain is reserved for men and that the social contract is about the relationship between men and government and not citizens and government, come together to exclude women – notwithstanding rights guaranteed in law and the political rhetoric of good governance and participatory democracy¹²².

Taboo topics, including honor crimes, and domestic violence, were rarely mentioned within women’s campaign programs and agendas. Abiding by their political parties, or attempting to conciliate the public, most female candidates avoid bringing gender-sensitive topics to the table. Electoral campaigns are directed to develop propaganda plans for basic services, placing women’s issues as minor concerns¹²³.

Hence, it is unsurprising to see Tishreen women candidates, including winners, recurrently pinpointing the civic-service programs, resonating males’ approaches as Al-Salhy assures twice that she ran for office to be able to provide basic services to her district¹²⁴.

Women’s issues vary in the area that Al-Salhy represents, their needs and demands are highly related to their geographical zones, including the Marshes / Al-Chibayish. It is a huge body of water place where successive systemization of desiccation and climate change have brought the area into disastrous consequences¹²⁵. Marsh women were also affected by the desiccation process as their daily life activities are based on the local environmental resources. Old women with knowledge and skills for producing and maintaining livelihood in marshes are currently home-based, and the new generation of women miss this intellectual capital as it does not relate to their lives anymore¹²⁶. Women’s needs and expectations in these areas are related to how healthy the ecosystem of Chibayish is, otherwise their activities are totally restricted. Women’s empowerment in Chibayish is not limited to providing programs of education, health, or employment, rather their main problem is caused by regional contestation over water resources. Iran and Turkey dam-building programs on Euphrates and Tigris¹²⁷, exacerbating the environmental crisis in Al-Chibayish, creating further challenges to women’s rights in this area.



WHAT IS NEXT?

In 2019, Iraqi women took to the street to decry political injustice and social inequity. Their participation came at the cost of their security and defaming. However, Tishreen was a transformative experience for young women activists and protesters that labelled them as active political and electoral actors.

121 Author interview with a Tishreen woman candidate from Baghdad [24/11/2021].

122 Julie Bollington and Azza Karam, “Women in parliament: Beyond numbers, a revised edition”, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

123 Sinar Hussein, “العراق: يوم انتخابي ذكري مخيب لعمال النسويات” (Iraq: A disappointing male election day for feminists), Daraj, 10 October, 2021, <https://daraj.com/80808/>.

124 Author interview with Nissan Al-Salhy, the newly-elected Imtidad member.

125 Deutsche Welle, “Iraq’s marshes are drying up”, September 17, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/iraqs-marshes-are-drying-up/av-59217926>.

126 Nadia Al-Mudaffar Fawzi, Kelly Goodwin, Bayan Mahdi and Michelle Stevens, “Effects of Mesopotamian marsh (Iraq) desiccation on the cultural knowledge and livelihood of marsh Arab women”, *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability*, 2(3):e01207, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ehs2.1207>.

127 The Arab Weekly, “Iran, Turkey dam building exacerbates Iraq’s drought problem,” November 15, 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/iran-turkey-dam-building-exacerbates-iraqs-drought-problem>.

The amended electoral law unfolded several limitations that restricted many women protesters, who were willing to vote, from balloting. This experience showed that although Tishreen succeeded in installing a novel type of young opposition inside the parliament, it highlighted the need for programs of political education among young people. Further, it elucidated that the imperative of having a politically educated generation able to lead the new chapter of governance post-Tishreen is still to be achieved.

Having Tishreen female MPs is a turning point in Iraqi women activism post-2003. The fact that they secured their seats depending solely on their votes signifies a shift in the electoral culture that favors male gender and political history. It signifies the beginning of a long path as one of Tishreen women describes it:

"The change will eventually come, if it is not today, then after a year, if it is not in this round, then the next one, or after a decade, the change will come since Tishreen cultivated its seeds in the political system¹²⁸."

Several challenges and obstacles will be faced by the female MPs, all women interviewees asserted that any women, including Tishreen women, will be under political and social pressure once they get into parliament.

"The first obstacle for Tishreen women was to be elected, the second and the biggest challenge for them would be how to resist political intimidation and/or temptation¹²⁹."

Women's political representation has existed by virtue of law since 2005, however, women's access to decision-making bodies, learning how to function within them, and making a serious impact through them is still a challenge that needs to be seriously addressed. All women interviewees asserted that Iraqi women have been fighting back against marginalization and side-lining, even when they retreat to their comfort zones (private spheres, cyber-activism).

Within the transitional moment of Tishreen, the new generation of women activists and protesters realized the need to possess political literacy, in order to take concrete actions. There was a clear awareness among women protesters to diagnose their needs when the chance to make the change came, emphasizing that they should be part of the political process.

The foremost policy recommendation is that women's political activism should be protected de jure and de facto, this should be done through delivering accountability for any form or type of gender-based violence.

To this end, this report recommends that women's empowerment should start from the early stages utilizing the educational system, primary and secondary schools. Introducing subjects that endorse gender equity and instill girls' leadership can be implemented should the Ministry of Women / The Committee of Woman, Childhood and Family collaborate with the Ministry of Education. Both bodies should consider introducing and implementing programs that are conducive to gender equity. These programs can be adjusted in accordance with the schools' cultural and geographical needs. Several women interviewed for this report asserted the importance of education in shaping students' perception about gender equity.

Another top-to-down approach should also come through changing the depiction of women in official mass media channels. Infrequently, media channels appreciate the success that young women activists, entrepreneurs, and politicians achieve. The dominant women's portrayal is not presented to promote women's self-respect and social recognition. The importance of the role of mass media during election times is vastly critical. Recurrent celebration of women's successful projects would normalize circulating their electoral programs and campaigns during the elections.

A similar point raised by some women interviewees is the need to have woman-based media channels and platforms. A T.V. channel, or a radio station, and social media pages that are dedicated to women's issues and problems cannot be emphasized enough specifically if they were to cover women's problems in regional and rural areas. Most news covered about women comes from city centers and urban areas, neglecting other geographical zones and women from other social classes, including those who are disenfranchised, internally displaced, and women from rural and agricultural areas, or Bedouin.

A very interesting point that this report reveals is the diversity of women's needs that are highly related to their geographical locations. Undeniably, the government should facilitate women's fair access to health and hygiene, education, and employment, but these responses should be also adjusted in accordance with the environmental and locational requirements of women who live outside urban cities.

Two game changers entered the Iraqi parliament this round, young political parties and 14 independent women, aiming to achieve egalitarian demands of the public. Having new in the upcoming parliamentary round will unfold several realities in relation to women's political representation, and the notion of democracy in Iraq.

128 Author interview with a woman protester from Basra [19/10/2021].

129 Author interview with a woman protester from Baghdad [22/11/2021].

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