

Chapter 13

The Trade Union Movement of Iraq after 2003: Exploring the Role of Narratives in Turbulent Regions

Thomas Erich Jakob
Philipps University of Marburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that transition after critical junctures is heavily linked to the narratives which prevail the discourse of the respective country. Different political actors try to legitimize retroactively current claims to power. In such “zero hour” the extent of ability to organize, mobilize, set incentives, and protect followers is of the essence. This chapter uses the example of Iraq after 2003 where the split between Kurds, Shi’i Muslims, and Sunni Muslims, became the driving force behind political action and loyalty. An established counter-narrative deconstructs the claim that an eternal Shi’i – Sunni split determined all outcomes of Iraqi history, stating that religion was historically a rather subordinate identity. Then crucial contributions to the deepening of the sectarian cleavage by religious networks, the Iraqi constitution, and the policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority, (CPA) are shown and exemplified using the Iraqi trade union movement after 2003.

INTRODUCTION

We all know the allegory of an elephant standing in a dark room while several people enter the room from several sides, touch, feel, smell, and hear what they face and afterwards discuss what that silly thing in that room might have been. Of course, everyone has an own version, an own view, own experiences, and thus an own focus.

Such games are played more than often in scientific and political discourses. They can be applied to the history of countries and peoples, constructing path dependencies and thus legitimizing current policies, forming current identities, and societal fractions. These versions of events, opinions and views are called narratives. They constitute bonds, nations, or ethnicities and may affect directly or indirectly the distribution of power.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9675-4.ch013

A recent illustration of the distribution of power against the background of narratives can be witnessed in Iraq. The narrative of the eternal and always underlying Sunna – Shi'a-dichotomy prevailed and led the country into an ethnosectarian division to an extent never witnessed before in its history. The reasons, of course, are complex and the case of Iraq will preoccupy scientists for at least some decades.

However, the notion that tensions in Iraq derive from an ethnosectarian division anchored in the history of Iraq because of a steady suppression of the Shi'a majority by a Sunni minority is consensus in the media, think tanks and even some scientific papers nowadays. This chapter argues that this perception is too narrow, even dangerous, and perpetuates itself. Hence, the chapter describes a vicious circle that started with the occupation in 2003 and ended with the almost complete destruction of secular civil society institutions and growing sectarian violence in Iraq.

This chapter is divided into three sections which descend from the described vicious circle, summed up in figure 1 (see appendix). The three main questions are: Is the ethnosectarian reading of Iraq's history unavoidable? Second, how did this reading become the dominant one after 2003? And third, how did it contribute to the destruction of secular civil society institutions?

The first part deals with the modern history of Iraq showing three things: First, it is much more likely that discrimination of certain groups started before the wave of mass conversion to Shi'ism in southern Iraq and that this discrimination had no genuine religious background. Second, Iraq witnessed a time of flourishing civil society with little importance of religious affiliations. Third, the religious question entered the political landscape in 1991 – and only to a marginal extent before – strongly influencing the US perception of Iraq.

Because of the above mentioned atmosphere of consensus about the leading role of religion in the tensions of Iraq and its history, it is difficult to

make a contradictory point about the importance of the ethnosectarian division. Therefore, the first section is the most important pillar of the entire chapter. If this part fails to convince the reader, all other parts become more or less worthless. This is why it is the longest and probably the most elaborated section. However, those readers who are familiar with the modern history of Iraq can have only a short look or even skip this section.

In the second part, it will be shown how the occupational forces perpetuated the deepening of the sectarian cleavage by the state building strategy. This strategy consisted of a consociationalist system according to the perception of a religious divided country on the one hand and of a quick reactivation of the oil industry on the other. Additionally, clerical networks grew in importance in the shadow of the crushed political system, providing infrastructure and money for organization of interests.

So, the distribution of rents and resources and thereby questions of security after 2003 were tied to religious affiliation and other, mostly secular currents rapidly lost influence. This was particularly problematic, as consociationalism needs plurality to function effectively. To exemplify this loss of influence, the third section will, underlining the thesis proposed in part one and part two, show how the trade union movement, being one of the most secular movements after 2003 in Iraq, declined from 2003 – 2012. Again, coming back to figure 1, the perception of a religiously divided country was nourished, and the vicious circle started all over again.

Today, even the idea of splitting the country into three states, which tended to be considered as the least likely of all possibilities of constitutional engineering and their long term outcomes ten years ago (Anderson & Stansfield, 2005, pp. 213-215), became accepted in public discourse, sometimes promoted as an inevitable result of the democratic transition in Iraq and whole Middle East (Ashdown, 2014).

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