

## **THE INTERPLAY OF VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IRAQI 2019 UPRISING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Social Movements and Political Violence: An International Case paper will define political violence in a general and theoretical sense. It will classify major types of political violence and concentrate on major four types of political violence. Then, it will apply a particular one to an international case of social movement, specifically in Iraq where a popular uprising took place in October 2019 and is currently affecting politics in Iraq. Iraq has witnessed a new wave of protests, but it was unprecedented and almost unique and has distinctive characteristics. These protests included the masses of protesters who felt the flaws of the system and the corruption of the authority, and they realized that the political elite as a whole is unable and/or unwilling to implement their demands. Protesters practiced a variety of methods in expressing their demands, ranging between peaceful demonstrations, civil disobedience, and armed clash. They were accompanied by bloody violent incidents that killed over 800 people and injured tens of thousands. The paper will examine the reasons for the protest, and how and why the government and some armed pro-government groups used violence and assassinations against activists. What was the reaction to the violence? What was the result of the uprising? Did it reach its goals? and what are the prospects of repeated demonstrations and the possibility of regime change? The paper will analyze that and present a future outlook of such a social movement.

**Keywords:** Social movements, Iraq, violence, uprising, protest, sectarianism.

### **Introduction**

Social movements are conscious and concerted efforts by ordinary people to bring about change in their society, utilizing extra-institutional means. These movements are collective, organized, and sustained challenges to authority, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices. They are primarily made up of ordinary people rather than members of the political or economic elite, and last longer than a single protest or riot. Social movements are a crucial part of civil society,

where individuals and groups can engage in debate about their future, and while they need not always be political in nature, they generally involve protesting against something, either explicitly or implicitly (Tilly, 2004).

A social movement is a type of collective action, consisting of informal groups, sometimes in large numbers, of individuals or institutions focused on a political or social issue for a change (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). A social movement is based on resisting, rejecting, or implementing a social change. It is frequent to find social movements in the developed world but historically many social movements have arisen to oppose colonialism and oppression. Some social movements contributed to the democratization of countries, which might lead to their success. In modern history, social movements have become a global expression of dissent.

Contemporary movements have taken advantage of technology by mobilizing people around the country and even the world depending on their nature and purpose. The use of popular means of communication is a method of successful movements. Organizations' support for social movements can be associated with the use of social media to facilitate ground engagement and teamwork.

Political scientists and sociologists have developed various empirical theories and research on social movements, in addition to discussing the role of social movements in setting the agenda and their impact on politics.

The government occasionally and depending on the situation uses violence and excessive force by its security forces or groups associated with the ruling class (Smith, 2020). This is one main reason for some protesters or demonstrators to turn violent. Some movements are becoming radicalized by two factors: the escalation of the police and the competitive escalation. This is when protesters compete to win the atmosphere against political opponents and other protest groups, and if the police and private security guards are very quick to use violence. These interactions and mixers lead the demonstrators to acts of violence, and their actions create what are called "frames of injustice," where the state becomes seen as fundamentally unjust (Johnson, 2018). State repression creates solidarity among the participating movements, which justifies their need for violence as a form of self-defense, as expressed by saying that: violence emerges from violence.

Social or political movements use violence because the political horizon of these groups is blocked by the state, which pushes a number of those involved in these movements to use violence (Smith, 2019). The mechanism or push towards extremism and political violence requires looking at political opportunities, as violence represents one of the options presented to practice politics, as protest movements tend to adopt violence when political opportunities for

them become limited or non-existent. They adopt violence during direct confrontation processes, and with the decline in the momentum of the demonstrations and the curve of the protests, the previous experiences of violent protests play a prominent role in the tendency of a number of its participants to think of individual violence as a solution. Not a little faith in peaceful means of protest, protests in the stage of frustration lose number and move to the stage of violence.

Political violence is violence committed by people or governments to achieve political goals, whereas violence used by the state against other countries can be described as a war, or against non-state actors especially police brutality or genocide (Nacos, 2016). It can also describe politically motivated violence, by non-state actors against the state (rebellion, riot, treason, or coup), or against other non-state actors. In addition, inaction on the part of the government is described as a form of political violence, such as refusing to alleviate a famine or denying other, politically identifiable resources within its territory (Jones, 2021).

### **Defining Political Violence**

The prevailing concept of violence centers on its physical manifestation typically intended to harm or cause damage to its target. In the realm of politics, violence can take many forms, from traditional physical violence like fists and firearms to more destructive tools such as weapons of mass destruction. A more comprehensive understanding of violence encompasses other forms of oppression and manipulation that do not necessarily involve direct physical harm (Danziger & Lupo, 2020, p. 323). For instance, a social group situated at the bottom rungs of a societal hierarchy. Such a group may face various forms of discrimination in areas like education, healthcare, employment, and housing. Some argue that such systemic oppression should be considered a kind of violence perpetuated by those in power against the fundamental rights of the marginalized group, namely, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Danziger & Lupo, 2020). The best definition is political violence is the use of actual physical violence or very serious threats of such violence to achieve political goals.

Even if most people accept the social contract, some individuals and groups do not, arguing that the existing political society and its social contract have no authority over their actions. They might claim they have never accepted the authority of the current government or that the political system is illegitimate (because it lacks a democratic mandate or because it has failed to deliver security, stability, and prosperity).

A simple taxonomy of political violence can be based on specifying the source of the violence and the target of that violence. Either party may be a state or an individual/ group. Some authors distinguish four categories of political violence. According to some political scientists, there are

five categories of political violence (Danziger & Lupo, 2020, 324). Here are some types of political violence.

### **1. State Violence against Individuals or Groups**

There are numerous situations where the use of political violence by the state to maintain order seems justifiable when people or groups appear to have broken the law. The majority of people are apt to support the state's efforts to establish and uphold public order in such situations. However, some government uses of force are more troubling. The state's legal use of violence to uphold public order can be contrasted with the state's potential for being extremely repressive and discriminatory in its use of force. Politics that defy the ruling political elite are viewed as crimes in some nations (Danziger & Lupo, 2020). Security forces are a vital tool in a state's arsenal against its adversaries. These consist of both authorized armed organizations, such as the regular military and police, and unrecognized ones (paramilitary forces, government-aligned leagues). In addition, the state has the authority to deny citizens access to benefits like decent employment, housing, and welfare services, which can result in severe suffering or even death.

### **2. Individual Violence against an Individual**

The violence in this category is typically not overtly political in nature. The majority of such violence, including murder, robbery, rape, assault, and crimes against property like burglary and arson, is considered a conventional crime (Danziger & Lupo, 2020).

### **3. Group Violence against an Individual**

The majority of politically motivated violence, such as assassinations, is carried out by an individual on behalf of a group. Group violence against an individual can take many forms, including bullying, mob attacks, and hate crimes. In these situations, the individual is targeted and victimized because of their perceived differences or affiliation with a particular group. This type of violence can be particularly devastating, as the victim may feel isolated and powerless against the collective force of the group (Anti-Defamation League, (n.d.)

### **4. Group Violence against a Group**

Group-based violence takes two forms, nation-based violence (including genocide) and class conflict (Weinstein, 2007). Nation-based violence occurs when nationality groups demand political autonomy and sometimes try to create their own sovereign state based on national identity. Sometimes, violence between different groups may stem from a class conflict, which can be linked to ethnic or religious differences. In these conflicts, one group typically has more power in terms of social, economic, and political standing. Supporters of the class theory contend

that such conflicts are not necessarily driven by religious or ethnic factors, but rather by a struggle between different social classes that arise from inequalities in society. It is important to note that class conflict can occur between any social group, regardless of any ethnic or national differences that might exist, such as between peasants and landlords or capitalists and workers (Kerbo, H. R. 2016).

### **5. Individual or Group Violence against the State**

Violence directed towards the political system can have various motives, ranging from individual or group frustration to a more sustained, deep-seated hostility towards the system. This can lead to spontaneous outbursts of violence or a series of planned violent actions to overthrow the existing political system (Danziger & Lupo, 2020).

Among such types of violence is a Coup. A coup occurs when the top leader or part of the leadership group is replaced by violent means or the explicit threat of violence. Another type is Riots and Rebellion when people find their political, social, or economic conditions intolerable, their frustration can escalate from demonstrations and civil disobedience to riots. Riots historically have consisted of spontaneous and relatively disorganized group violence against property, agents of the political system, perceived opponents in society, or random targets (Stott & Reicher 2017). Riots are often triggered by a specific incident, such as a police shooting, or an economic problem such as a sudden large increase in the price of basic foodstuffs. The emergence of social networking technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter, has allowed individuals to communicate with many people at once. These technologies have lowered the barriers to the organization; demonstrations can now be planned, and they have the potential to turn into riots. Once riots start, they can spread or become more organized into violent demonstrations as others are motivated to express their dissatisfaction with the political system or social conditions.

A civil war results when a significant proportion of the population in a region actively supports a movement such as the separatist movement, and political violence emerges on a large scale. In a civil war, the government may attempt to suppress the separatist movement using military force, leading to a protracted armed conflict. Civil wars can have severe humanitarian consequences, with widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and loss of life.

A revolution is a rapid and fundamental transformation of the state organization and the class structure (Skocpol, 1979). Unlike other types of political violence targeting the state, a revolution aims to dismantle the current political system and replace it with a new one that has a different distribution of power and value allocations. Following a revolution, new leaders take control,

promising to reorganize the state, adopt a new ideology, and redistribute power and resources among various groups.

### **The Iraqi 1919 uprising**

Mass demonstrations broke out in Iraq in the fall of 2019 and rapidly spread throughout the entire nation. Protesters called for the end of corruption, better public services, and increased political elite accountability. Thousands of people took to the streets in Iraqi towns during this uprising, which followed a string of smaller demonstrations in earlier years. It was one of the biggest and longest-lasting protests in the country's recent history.

The eruption of the Iraqi October uprising was by the young revolutionaries, the majority of them were university graduates and students in the beginning and later joined by the unemployed and marginalized youth. The October 2019 Iraqi protest and uprising was a widespread movement that began on October 1, 2019, and continued for several months.

Despite its rich oil wealth, Iraq has been plagued by chronic electricity and drinking water shortages for years, which has added to the suffering of a population of nearly 40 million already exhausted by years of war. Transparency International ranks Iraq as the 12th most corrupt country in the world, with official reports indicating that around \$450 billion has disappeared from public funds since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, which is four times the state budget and more than double Iraq's gross domestic product. Despite this, the population of Iraq continues to live in deteriorating conditions (Euro news, 2019).

Throughout history, individuals have expressed their dissatisfaction with various aspects of society, and in some cases, they have taken collective action to effect change. This phenomenon has been observed in modern societies, where people have organized themselves through strikes, pickets, and rallies as part of the labor movement, which seeks to achieve unionization and pursue political goals (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). The Iraqi uprising was a movement for change.

The protest movement in October 2019 differed from its predecessors that the geographical area of the protest increased; Instead of Baghdad and another province or two, protests were filling the squares and streets in 11 provinces. The demand also was over the nature of the movement and the need for services that are considered, according to the Iraqi constitution, a right of citizens. The lifted slogans touched the fundamental foundation on which this political system is based. The talk has become about the need to leave the principle of sectarian quotas that the state has followed since the American invasion of Iraq in April 2003 (Tareeq Al-Shaab, 2022).

The Iraqi government's initial response to the protests was one of repression. The security forces used tear gas, water cannons, and live ammunition to disperse the crowds, and hundreds of people were killed and many thousands more injured. The government also imposed a curfew and blocked access to social media sites in an attempt to quell the protests.

For the Iraqi youth, the main reasons for the uprising were:

**Corruption:** Corruption was a major issue in Iraq, with many Iraqis feeling that their government was rife with corruption and that it was hindering the country's development.

**Economic hardship:** The country was facing high unemployment rates, a lack of basic services, and rising poverty levels. Many Iraqis were struggling to make ends meet and saw little hope for the future.

**Political instability:** The government was seen as ineffective and unable to address the needs of the people. Many Iraqis felt that their leaders were more concerned with their own interests than with the needs of the country.

**Sectarianism:** Iraq is a country divided along sectarian lines, with tensions between the Shia and Sunni Muslim communities. Many Iraqis felt that sectarianism was exacerbating the country's problems and preventing progress.

**Foreign interference:** Iraq has been the site of various conflicts involving foreign powers, including the United States, Iran, and other regional players. Many Iraqis were concerned about foreign interference in their country, mainly Iran, and felt that it was exacerbating their problems (Alrawi, O. (2019)).

The main square in Iraq, the Tahrir Square, has been in the hands of activists for months from October 2019 till the end of the uprising. The square has been transformed into a self-organized area. Activists issued a declaration containing 20 demands. Among these demands are:

1 - The government must resign, and Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi must be tried for the killing of protesters.

2- Parliament must be dissolved.

3- A new constitution for Iraq must be prepared. Those involved in implementing the new constitution must be professional, independent in their work, and away from parties. Those who have been in politics since 2003 should not be included in the committee preparing the new constitution.

- 4- All religious institutions should be excluded from politics and their relationship with politics should be severed.
- 5- It is necessary to restore the resources of the Iraqi wealth that were seized by the Iraqi officials again.
- 6- A new and independent judicial body should be established in Parliament, and this Parliament should be free from parties.
7. The government must be abolished by partition on the basis of party, faith, family, tribe, and people's origin.
- 8- All armed groups in Iraq must be ended. Weapons must be handed over to the state.
9. Early elections should be held under the supervision of international forces. Parties that have not yet assumed their duties in the country should be elected.
10. All persons and parties who have been corrupt since 2003 should be exposed and prosecuted.
11. A national army should be established outside religious parties and institutions and clearly stated that its duty is to protect the country (Anfaarabic, 2019).

The demonstrations in southern Iraqi cities included mainly the governorates of (Basra, Maysan, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Karbala, Wasit, Diwaniyah, and Muthanna), and are the most severe and fierce, because the masses for the first time since 2003 attacked the headquarters of the ruling parties in the south and burned pictures of some symbols religious and political events, which triggered the immediate intervention of the government to end these demonstrations, and the matter reached a very tense degree, especially after hundreds of demonstrators were killed and more thousands were injured or disabled.

The security forces used excessive violence in several neighborhoods to disperse the sit-in. Many were killed after being hit by the government security rubber bullets in their heads. Many others were injured by gas after renewed clashes near the capital bridges leading to the government Green Zone.

The authority did not stop at using violence, premeditated killing, shooting, spreading its snipers, and planting smoke bombs in the heads and chests of its citizen but rather used what it could of the law to imprison hundreds of protesters by filing malicious lawsuits in one way or another. Noting that “the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq registered 5,190 lawsuits filed before the courts, and 3,189 demonstrators, human rights defenders, and media employees were arrested”. It added, "Kidnapping cases, even if the government did not stand behind them, or



were not implemented by its security services, is ultimately responsible for them, as it is the agency concerned with preserving the lives of its citizens and providing the necessary security to protect the lives of the demonstrators” (Tareeq Al-Shaab, 2022).

Since the beginning of October 2019, Iraq has witnessed a new wave of protests, but it was unprecedented and almost unique and has distinctive characteristics. Among these features, the demonstrations included various segments of society and seemed devoid of heads (whether partisan, religious, cultural, or civil organizations), as well as their youthful nature and revolutionary enthusiasm. Those protests included the masses of protesters who felt well and accurately felt the flaws of the system and the corruption of the authority, and they realized that the political elite as a whole is unable and/or unwilling to implement their demands (Baghdad Riwaq Center for Public Policy, 1919).

Since the start of the protest movement in Iraq, it had its own features and characteristics and it was mainly peaceful, which is the most obvious advantage despite all means of repression and violence and accusations of treason used by the authority and its militias. The nonviolence of the protesters was clear by using demonstrations, sit-ins, collecting signatures for certain demands, press releases and conferences, etc. Protesters emphasized peace in reaction to the government violence despite few voices asking to counter government violence by the same mean. The protesters were not involved in the use of weapons to respond to abuses of power, repression, and assassination. They believe in the democratic system and that change must be within the political process. They believed that any violent movement might lead to handing the country over to an unknown fate and may contribute to the reproduction of a dictatorship (Al-Mousawi, 2020).

Another feature of the protest was being of civic behavior. Civil was not a slogan raised in the Tahrir squares only, but it exceeded the nature of the protest discourse (statements, events slogans, research, and articles). It is a rejection of any formula that contradicts contemporary civil formulations. The movement was spontaneous, which does not mean the absence of organization, but it indicates the spontaneity of the movement despite the participation of some parties and groups; no party dominates the protest. Furthermore, the uprising was popular with class roots, which was reflected in the diversity of attendance extending from the middle class to the workers, from the peasants to the marginalized, from the poor to liberals and bourgeois, albeit in small numbers who represent the national bourgeoisie affected by the growth and exacerbation of the parasitic bureaucratic bourgeoisie (Al-Mousawi, 2020). Finally, it has a feature of continuity and spread, which constituted a strong point for the movement, where it was not confined to a certain area or time. It was a conscious behavior addressing reforming the Iraqi system that its structure is based on equilibrium quotas and sharing of spoils between the influentials. Also, they addressed service issues, the electricity crisis, the water issues,

employment, the corrupt system, and the dominance of the forces of corruption in ministries, and construction projects (Al-Mousawi, 2020).

Since the beginning of the October 2019 uprising, at least 700 peaceful protesters have been killed, 25,000 others have been injured, and many have disappeared. This repression was carried out by various forces: state security forces used stun grenades, anti-riot armored vehicles, tear gas intended for military use, and bullets, while paramilitary groups, Iran-backed militias, and mercenaries resorted to the use of live ammunition and automatic rifles. The Iraqi government also imposed a ban on the media, the Internet, and communications, as well as a curfew. Many protesters were threatened, arrested, beaten, kidnapped, and some were assassinated (Ali, 2021).

Despite the prevalence of clashes between protesters and security forces, and a number of injuries and deaths on both sides, the females only confirmed their presence in the field and their participation in the protest. This female participation helped in increasing the momentum and continuity of the demonstrations, as well as in raising the enthusiasm of young people and increasing their effectiveness (Baghdad Riwaq Center for Public Policy, 1919).

Some factions, especially those backed by Iran, continued to spread a narrative about the protest movement as a “foreign conspiracy.” In addition to the reported involvement of Iranian-backed militias in suppressing, kidnapping, and intimidating activists, the political elite organized counterdemonstrations framed as an attempt to remove what it called “undisciplined elements” from Baghdad's Tahrir Square, which was the center of the protest movement (Middle East Eye, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The protests and uprising that was the largest protest movement in Iraq's post-2003 history resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and a new government being formed and forced parliament to adopt a new electoral law. However, the underlying issues that led to the protests, such as corruption and political instability, have yet to be fully addressed, and Iraq continues to face significant challenges. The armed groups that are under the control of the main parties in the government are not being held accountable for causing deaths and injuries during protests.

It's another wave of waves of the protest movement, but it is distinguished by its turning point in the series of quantitative accumulations. The factors for the outbreak of protest movements in Iraq are still present, and the repercussions of the financial crisis and the economic measures of the government have been added to them and resulting in serious difficulties for millions of Iraqis. It is exacerbated by the insistence of the influential in the government to adhere to the

same failed approach, and their inability to provide solutions to the crises accumulated by the quota system and corruption.

The current sectarian and ethnic political system fail to make progress or improve the dire situation of the masses. A citizenship-based system is urgently needed. Citizens recognize the need for a civil state based on citizenship, as demonstrated by the power of social movements. Youth play a significant role in mobilizing citizens and promoting social justice and have developed expertise in protesting and demonstrating. They refuse to allow sectarian forces to rule the streets.

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