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Waves of Populism in Iraq

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Abstract:

This paper challenges the views that post-2003 Iraq should be studied in isolation and demonstrates that many of the pre-2003 dynamics impacted the post-2003 era, mainly populism. It sheds light on the three waves of populism in Iraq, the authoritarian populism of Saddam's regime being the first, given that he was the leader of a secular and pan-Arab party but frequently used religion and nationalism strategically and selectively under certain conditions, creating the context of modern populism. The second wave is the ethno-sectarian populism post-2003 that created multiple populist actors who demonstrated their allegiance to parliamentary democracy but undermined it by their practices. The third and final wave this paper examines is the modern populism of post-2014, where insiders nurtured nationalist populism due to the declining appeal of sectarianism, the deep political divisions, and widespread disappointment. This paper is based on a field study measuring popular perception of post-2003 political systems, including populist tendencies, level of trust, and other demographical and democratic factors.

Key Words: Populism, Democracy, ethno-sectarianism, authoritarianism, Iraq.

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موجات الشعبوية في العراق

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المُلخص:

هذا البحث يتحدى الافتراض القائل أن العراق بعد عام 2003 يجب دراسته بمعزل عن ديناميات التي سبقت عام 2003، اذ تبرهن هذه الدراسة على ان الشعبوية هي احدى الديناميات التي تمظهرت بصورة شعبوية استبدادية في النظام الديكتاتوري، نظرًا لأنه كان زعيم حزب علماني وعروبي على نطاق واسع، لكنه استخدم الدين والقومية بشكل استراتيجي وانتقائي في ظروف معينة، مما خلق سياق الشعبوية الحديثة. الموجة الثانية هي الشعبوية العرقية والطائفية بعد عام 2003 التي خلقت عدة جهات شعبوية، أظهرت ولاءهم للديمقراطية البرلمانية، ولكنها أضرت بها عبر ممارسات غير ديمقراطية. الموجة الثالثة والأخيرة التي يدرسها هذا البحث هي الشعبوية الحديثة بعد عام 2014، حيث تبنت جهات الشعبوية الوطنية بسبب تراجع جاذبية الطائفية والانقسامات السياسية العميقة وخيبة الآمال الشعبية. يستند البحث على جهد ميداني يظهر مدى انتشار الشعبوية وآثارها السلبية على الإدراك الشعبي لنظام الحكم ما بعد 2003 واستدامته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعبوية، الديمقراطية، السلطوية، الطائفية، العراق.

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Introduction

Iraq's political landscape, particularly post-2003, is often examined in a vacuum, leading to an oversimplified interpretation of its current dynamics. This isolated view overlooks the profound influence of historical contexts, particularly the role of populism in Iraqi politics, transcending the pre- and post-2003 eras. This paper endeavors to illuminate the continuous and evolving nature of populism in Iraq, tracing its lineage from the authoritarian populism under Saddam Hussein's regime through sectarian-driven politics post-2003 to the rise of nationalist populism post-2014.

This paper comprehensively examines these waves of populism, utilizing a blend of theoretical frameworks, including ideational, discursive, and political strategy lenses. It aims to offer an in-depth understanding of how populism has influenced and been shaped by the Iraqi political context. The empirical evidence, particularly a survey of Baghdad residents, further enriches this exploration, grounding theoretical insights into the perspectives of Iraqi citizens.

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the concept of populism, its variation, and its applications?
2. Does Saddam’s regime meet the criteria of authoritarian populism?
3. Does Iraq’s post-2003 meet the criteria of ethno-sectarian populism? Are there any links between Saddam’s era and the emergence of ethno-sectarian populism?
4. Did post-2014 witnessed the rise of modern populism? Its manifestation and its impact on democratization.

The hypothesis of the paper is based on the idea that there are causal mechanisms between the authoritarian populism of Saddam’s regime and subsequent variation of populism, ethno-sectarian populism, which in its turn led to the emergence of national populism.

The paper will be structured into four sections: The first section will review the literature on the variation of populism, the second

section will categorize the manifestation of populism in Iraq, the third section will present a field study on the rise of populism in Iraq, and the fourth section will be on results and discussions of the study. The paper will conclude with recommendations on democratic survival.

Section 1: Varieties of Populism

The concept of populism captured the attention of three conceptual approaches that define populism as an ideology, a discursive style, and a form of political mobilization, respectively. As an ideology, Cas Mudde defines populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elites" (2004, 543). Based on this approach, researchers focus their studies on the programmatic statements made by political actors, as they define populism as a set of ideas (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013, 7).

As a discursive style, Carlos de lat Torre defines populism as "a rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between the people and the oligarchy" (2000). Despite similarities between ideational and discursive definitions of populism, the latter escapes the simple dichotomy of populist/non-populist, towards being more scaled-based enables researchers to trace variations in levels and types of populist politics, as political actors employ populist discourse "selectively and strategically" (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013, 8).

As a political strategy, scholars focus on policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization. For example, Levitsky and Roberts defines populism as "a top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalist leaders who challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo" (2011, 67).

Despite these approaches agree that populism is based on the "moral vilification of elites and the veneration of ordinary people" (Bonikowski 2017, 184). It disagrees on the ontological status of populism. None of these approaches could explain the varieties of

populism in Iraq. For example, the populism of Saddam's regime could be explained by the discursive approach, given that he was the leader of a secular and pan-Arab party but frequently used religion and nationalism strategically and selectively to justify his policies, target political rivals, and rule out alternative explanations (Gray 2010, 28-46). The ethno-nationalist populism of post-2003 could be understood by the ideational approach, where not only the "corrupt elites" are identified explicitly, but also the "pure people" are identified based on ethnic and religious criteria (Dix 1985, 29 – 53). The post-2014 populism could be explained by the political strategy approach, as insider political actors attacked the government for pervasive corruption and lack of services to mobilize their bases and reach out to disenfranchised constituencies.

This paper will focus on empirical studies to better understand the characteristics of each wave of populism in Iraq and how they are interrelated. Given that this study is interested in understanding the influence of resurgent populism on democratic institutions and norms, it is better to use minimal definitions that limit modern populism to democratic countries, hence defining "populism as democratic illiberalism," where democraticness is obtained "when a party decides to contest non-violent or non-voter-intimidating elections and is able to—vocally or otherwise—demonstrate its allegiance to parliamentary democracy." On the other hand, illiberalism is obtained "when a party presents society as an antagonistic duel between 'the people' and the 'elites'; opts for polarization while shunning political compromise; and is willing to curb the law and violate minority rights to serve majoritarianism" (Pappas 2019, 36). The limitation of populism to democratic countries should not exclude the consequences of authoritarian populism of Saddam's regime, which created the context for the rise of modern populism, as discussed in the next section.

Section 2: Manifestation of Populism in Iraq

First: Authoritarian Populism of Saddam's regime

Authoritarian populism was the focus of a cohort of scholars from Latin America, identified by Pappas as Classics. Within this line of research, Robert H. Dix identified four characteristics of authoritarian populist parties: having strong and charismatic leaders, driven by loose anti-imperialist ideology, 'disposable masses,' and poorly articulated party organizations that are dependent on a leader (2022, 29 – 53).

Saddam Hussein established a ruthless dictatorship, where he started by purging his own party, eliminating all individuals he distrusted, and installing loyal clansmen to control the levers of the party and the state, which became utterly dependent on him. By initiating the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam established himself as the "leader of the Arab world." (Simons 1994) His rhetoric was dominated by anti-imperialist impulses. This brief description shows that Saddam's regime matches the characteristics of authoritarian populism in Latin America. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the discourse of the regime was populist as well.

Ramifications of Saddam's populist authoritarianism are extended to post-2003 Iraq. On the supply side, Pappas found that all cases of the ascendance of modern populism are attributed to "either the absence of an established party system or the precipitous decline—and often collapse—of previous party systems" (2019, 134). Also, Steven Levitsky and James Loxton found that weak institutions and parties are permissive conditions to populism (2013, 107–136). Saddam created a personalized regime, coopting and ruthlessly suppressing political rivals. (Levitsky & Loxton 2013, 107 – 136). On the demand side, Pappas found that populist voters have simplistic, adversarial, and moralistic worldviews (2019, 217). The overconsumption of conspiracies by Saddam's regime, its indoctrination of the educational system, and its control of media enabled the regime to impose a populist worldview on Iraqis. Hence, it created the context of the ascendance of populism.

Second: Ethno-nationalist populism of post-2003

Given that the ideational approach defined populism as a "thin-centered ideology," it could be combined with thicker ideologies, such as ethno-nationalism, where populists not only define the "corrupt elites" but also the "pure people" based on ethnic, racial, and religious criteria. Brat Bonikowski explained the convergence of populism, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarianism with a combination of economic, political, and cultural changes that "have threatened the collective status of national ethno-cultural majorities, which has activated pre-existing nationalist cleavages" (2017, 206).

Such convergence of these three components is evident in post-2003 Iraq. The post-2003 system was established based on the ethno-sectarian apportionment system, known as *muhasasa ta'ifia* (Dodge & Mansour 2020,187). Therefore, political actors who championed ethno-sectarian identities were rewarded in elections and have dominated the political scene. This was evident in the recent provincial elections of 2023, where the electoral campaigns of the three significant lists that obtained the majority of the seats were identity-based. Despite these actors' allegiances to parliamentary democracy, they undermine it once in power by the capture of the state, mass clientelism, and discriminatory legalism, which are patterns identified by Bonikowski (2017, 187).

Authors listed different drivers for the rise of ethno-sectarianism, including the American institutionalization of sectarianism in the Iraq Governing Council according to estimated demographics of ethnic/sectarian groups (Shook 2015, 378). Another explanation is the revival of identities from being marginal to more assertive and aggressive due to altered relations among societal components (Haddad 2013, 124). This analysis attempts to understand post-2003 Iraq in isolation from Saddam's era. However, Saddam's regime diminished political life and forced all rivals to face executions or flee the country. Hence, political leaders of the post-2003 lacked an effective organizational structure to mobilize, and instead, they

relied on the only link they had to their constituency, namely identity, whether sectarian, tribal, and/or regional, especially the "masses" has a simplistic, adversarial, and moralistic worldview, so it rewarded ethno-sectarian populism.

Post-2003 political actors were eager to register their parties, mobilize their bases during each electoral cycle, and engage in lengthy negotiations to participate in the parliamentary democracy. However, they often established national unity governments in 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2021, where senior positions in the executive branch were granted to loyalists, regardless of being qualified or not to the assigned post. This allows political leaders to extend control over state institutions and use it for personal and partisan ends. Hence, the government operates based on patronage networks that link civil servants in different branches of government with popular bases to exchange loyalty for access to public jobs and contracts, protection, and power. Furthermore, the enforcement of the law is highly selective. One clear example is the De-Ba'athification Law, where Ba'athists were allowed to receive senior positions in the army and bureaucracy because of their loyalty to certain political actors despite explicit constitutional and legislative provisions against it.

Critics might not agree to label post-2003 as a populist phase, as it over-extends the concept of populism to a distinct ideational phenomenon, which is ethno-nationalism. However, this paper does not deny the existence of identity politics, but it was combined with populism, as political actors have demonstrated their allegiance to parliamentary democracy and simultaneously engaged in illiberal practices that have undermined democracy. Therefore, the post-2003 Iraqi state created multiple populist actors.

Third: Nationalist populism of post-2014

The decline of sectarianism post-2014, deep political division, and widespread disappointment pushed some actors to adopt national populism. The decline of sectarianism on the demand side is captured by number of surveys, including National Democratic

Institute (NDI) survey that found 84% think "Sunni-Shia relations seen as improving" (2017). This is a significant drop from NDI's 2012 survey, where 70% of Sunnis, 56% of Kurds, and 36% of Shia "think sectarianism is worsening." (NDI 2012) Also, polarization hit established political parties, which were unified by the threat of ISIS, over issues like the future of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the response to regional rivalry, and economic reforms (Al-Rikabi 2018). This polarization was not limited to political class but extended to popular bases, where a survey found that 40% supported PMF integration, 23% supported its institutionalization, and 19% in favor of disbanding it (NDI 2017). Furthermore, popular dissatisfaction towards incumbents for lack of services and job opportunities, as evident in multiple protest waves since 2015 and the wide circulation of the phrase "Al Mujarab la yujarab/tried should not be tried again." (Al-Asady 2018)

These developments pushed political parties to brand/posture themselves differently and adopt different electoral mobilization strategies (Institute of Regional and International Studies – IRIS 2018). Certain political parties opted for identity politics, such as State of Law's Shia victimhood (Maliki), Iraqi Decision's Sunni unification (Nujifi), and KDP's victimhood of Kurds. Other blocs opposed ethno-sectarianism, such as Allawi's National List and Abadi's Victory List, both attempted to rely on "civicness" to mobilize general electorate. Allawi stressed national reconciliation, and Abadi attempted to capitalize on his government's successes in defeating ISIS, imposing federal authority, and preventing the collapse of the economy. However, certain insider political actors adopted nationalist populism in order to attract disenfranchised citizens and simultaneously dis-encourage the general electorate from participation. The most obvious case is Sairoon.

Leader of Sadrist Movement H.E Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr decided to totally dissolve his own party (Al-Ahrar) and established new party "Istaqama," totally dependent on him. This could be attributed to the popular anger against incumbents, something Sadr nurtured

by releasing his popular phrase “Shal’a Qal’a,” in reference to uprooting all incumbent political elites, including his own elected officials (Mari 2016). He also brokered a new alliance with forces active in protest movement, mainly the Communist party, to establish Sairoon Alliance. Furthermore, he rebranded his rhetoric by calling for a vision of "citizen based Iraqi Unity," away from Shia centrism, and attacking the corruption of the establishment, something he nurtured since 2015 through frequent protest waves and evident in Sairoon's slogan "Marching for Reform." (IRIS 2018). However, the resort to national populism is not limited to Sadr, but was pioneered by many insiders, such as Mashan al-Jabouri, who labeled his rivals (Nujifi and Karbouli) as part of the sectarian, corrupt establishment, and attacked Kurds as being behind all divisions in Sunni and Shia camps to maximize their gains. Such rhetoric was to posture himself as a nationalist, anti-corruption candidate back in 2014 (Jabouri 2013).

Such rhetoric enforced the perception that the establishment is corrupt and participation in elections legitimizes it, pressuring excluded masses to think about alternatives, such as protest. Therefore, electoral turnout decreased gradually each electoral cycle, providing partisan bases the opportunity to decide election results. For example, all 3 Sadrist lists obtained 110K votes in 2014, resulting in 34 seats, but they received 54 seats in the 2018 election by obtaining 150K (Sadrist only obtained 130K, ~20K increase), mainly due to the low election rate.

Section 3: Empirical Evidence

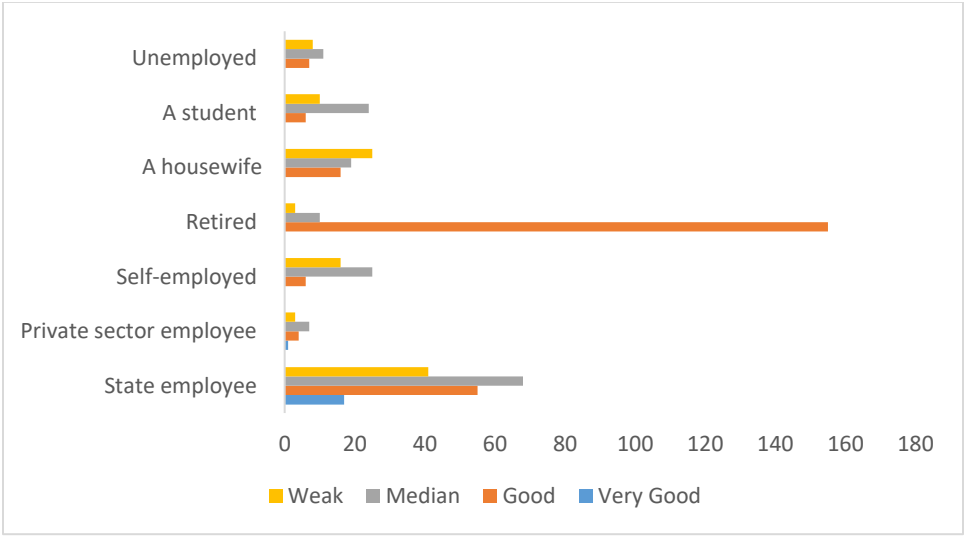
Given that Baghdad is not only the capital, but also represents the largest electoral district (69 out of 329 seats), political parties concentrate their messages and list the largest number of candidates (ex. 2018 elections: 1,985 out of 6,904 candidates nationwide), a survey of Baghdadi residents could empirically assess the rise of populism and its consequences. Literature associates populism with low socioeconomic status, low political trust, and higher inclination to populist attitudes. Therefore, it is crucial to measure these

variables and link it to the voting behavior to demonstrate the rise of populism. Also, most scholars of populism demonstrated that populism undermines democratic norms and could lead to competitive authoritarian regimes. In contrast, others stressed that populism gives voice to the marginalized. Therefore, it is important to measure the consequences of populism as well.

First: Survey Sample

400 residents were interviewed face to face in all districts and sub-districts of Baghdad for the period 15/12/2019 – 6/1/2020 by 10 enumerators (5 females and 5 males)**.** This period, in particular, witnessed the eruption of the 2019 protest, triggering wider discussion on the nature and sustainability of the democratic system. Therefore, it was just the time to assess the rise of populism and its implications. The sample covered all ten districts of Baghdad in proportion to eligible voters of the 2014 parliamentary elections due to the absence of an official census; still, it is a realistic indicator of population density. Annex I present the demographics of the sample, including age group, sex, and educational attainment. As for the socioeconomic status of participants, two questions were asked, namely the level of income and employment status. Living conditions seem worrying as 27% describe their income level as weak, equivalent to those who describe it as Good. One of the interesting insights that despite 45% of the sample are state employees, only 4% describe their life conditions as very good and 14% (55) as good, as appears in Chart I.

Chart I. Socioeconomic status



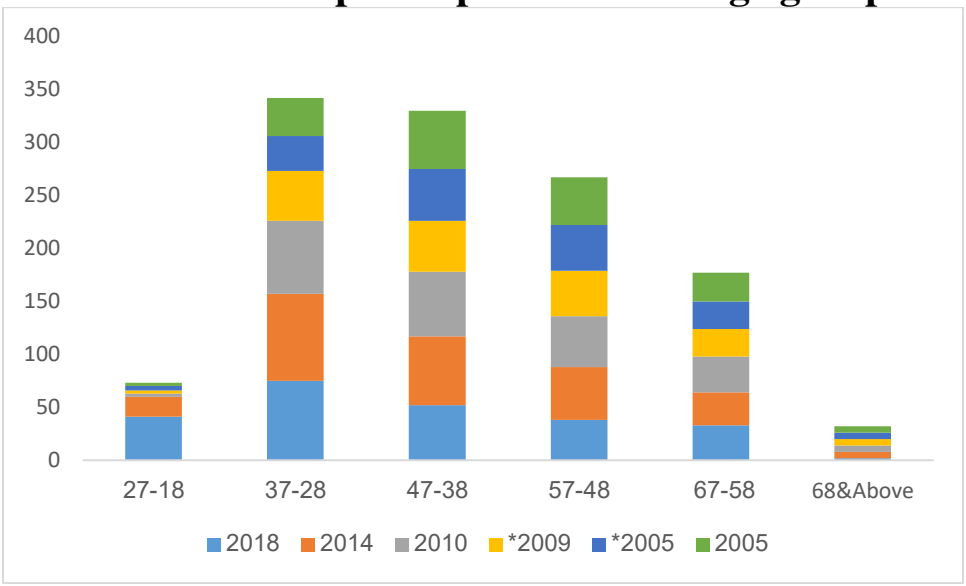
Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Second: Political Indicators

Participants' political knowledge seems rather high, as 84.3% correctly identified the Speaker, and 69.8% identified the Mayor of Baghdad. This could be attributed to a high level of interest in politics, where 10% of participants were very interested, 19% interested, and 50% somewhat interested. On the other hand, only 33% identified the President of the Sunni endowment, 20% the President of the Higher Judicial Council (HJC), 17.8% of Baghdad Governor, and 16% of President of the Shia endowment. Such divergence could be attributed to political instability in the case of the Baghdad Governor, as the governor was replaced twice, lack of interest in religious and legal affairs as for the case of Shia and Sunni endowment, as well as the President of HJC.

The sample demonstrates an opposite pattern of voter turnout, in contrast to the actual turnout, which has decreased subsequently each electoral cycle. This should be attributed to an increase in the participation of the age group 18 – 27, who were not allowed to vote in earlier elections, as appears in Chart II.

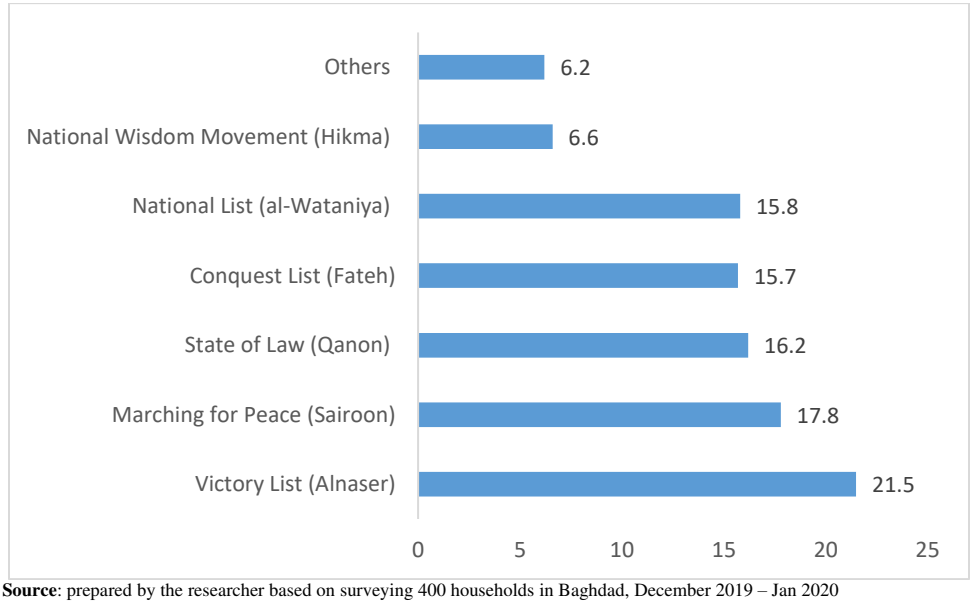
Chart II. Electoral participation across age groups



Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Those who participated in the 2018 parliamentary elections reflected the fractured political landscape, where the top five lists obtained numbers close to each other but slightly different from the released 2018 election results, as shown in Chart III. In regards to other forms of political participation, protest was the most prominent, as 39% of the sample either participated once or multiple times, in contrast to joining a political party, only about 4%, reflecting a stigma over joining political parties and a preference to out-state channels. The latter is further reflected in having 36% engaged in boycotting products, and 22% mobilizing on social media, compared to only 16% who contacted MPs and 12%, who signed petitions.

Chart III. Voting behavior in the 2018 parliamentary elections



Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Chart IV. Forms of political participation

Despite most participants demonstrating high levels of suspicion towards others (68.5%) and high level of dissatisfaction with the current government (92.5%), still 45.5% believe "Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government," compared to 28.3% who believes " Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable," as seen in the following tables:

Table I.A. Authoritarian Nostalgia Across Age Groups

Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.	Age Groups						Total
	18-27	28-37	38-47	48-57	58-67	68	
	13	39	26	25	7	3	113
Total	69	139	88	59	38	7	400
Percent	18.8	28	29.5	42.3	18.4	42.8	100

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Table I.B. Authoritarian Nostalgia Across Employment Status

	Public sector	Private sector	Self-employee	Retired	housewife	student	None	Total
Frequency	56	8	5	10	17	10	7	113
Total	182	15	47	28	60	42	26	400
Percent	30.8	53.3	10.5	35.7	28.3	23.8	26.9	

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

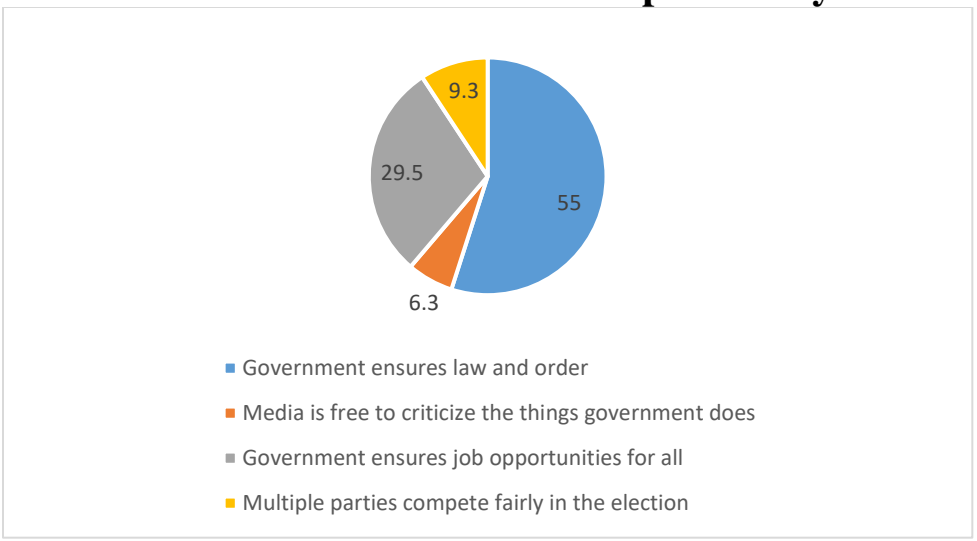
Table I.C. Authoritarian Nostalgia Across Educational Levels

Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.	Income Level				Total
	Very good	Good	Median	Weak	
	9	35	46	22	112
Total	18	109	164	106	397
Percent	50	32.1	28	20.7	

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Participants still occupied by security and job creation, as 55% think imposing security and order is the core responsibility of a government, compared to 29.5, who opts to job creation. On the contrary, only 9.3 believes in having multiple parties competing in fair elections, and 6.3% believes having media freedom as core responsibility of a government as appears in Chart V.

Chart V. Government core responsibility



Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Third: Populist Tendencies

Majority of participants, ranging from 95% to 70%, demonstrated two important characteristics of populist attitudes, people-centrism and anti-elitism, as well as, over 25% have Manichaean worldview as shown in Table II. Therefore, people sentiment is limited to anti-elite, but not extended to their bases to some extent, as about 30% disapprove Manichaean outlook.

Participants' trust seems rather low, where majority of participants have low or non-existent trust in parliament (92.8 %), health institutions (89.7%), political parties (88%), local government (82%), educational system (81.5%), media institutions (81%), judicial system (80.3%), United Nations (79.8%), Civil Society Organization (78.8%), tribal leaders (71.5%), religious leaders (65.5%), Army (58.5%), PMF (45.3%). Such negative sentiment could be attributed to the current internal and external crises that hit Iraq and the perceived failure of all institutions and actors. However, trust in PMF is higher than Army, driven mainly by high

level of trust among supporters of Fateh list (81.5%), Hikma (66%), and State of Law (61.5%).

Table II: Distribution of Sample over Populism Scale

Phrases	Totally Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Sometime Agree	Disagree	Total
Politician listen closely	319	61	11	4	5	400
	79.7	15.3	2.7	1.0	1.3	100.0
Not spend time among people	21	52	46	32	249	400
	5.3	13.0	11.4	8.0	62.3	100.0
Will of the people prioritized	239	89	39	20	13	400
	59.7	22.3	9.7	5.0	3.3	100.0
Government run by few	220	65	47	15	53	400
	55.0	16.3	11.8	3.8	13.3	100.0
Officials use power to improve people's lives	32	17	30	72	249	400
	8.0	4.3	7.4	18.0	62.3	100.0
People run the government are crooked	257	61	41	20	21	400
	64.2	15.2	10.3	5.0	5.3	100.0
a person is good or bad if you know their politics	62	89	65	63	121	400
	15.5	22.3	16.2	15.7	30.3	100.0
Disagree with politically are not evil	118	108	88	46	40	400
	29.5	27.0	22.0	11.5	10.0	100.0
Disagree with are just misinformed	47	48	97	76	132	400
	11.7	12.0	24.3	19.0	33.0	100.0

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Four: Democratic Perception

Despite 45.5% think democracy as a model is preferable to other kinds of government, the majority of respondents (77.25%) rated Iraq democracy below 5 on scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates there is no democracy and 10 indicates there is complete democracy, as shown in Table III

Table III. Perception of Iraqi Democracy

No Democracy Complete Democracy										
Scale	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
	116	**29**	**70**	**68**	**26**	**47**	**21**	**13**	**10**	**0**	**0**

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

On the other hand, 61.25% of respondents think democracy is not suitable to Iraq, as appears in Table IV. Respondents reported democracy spur economic developments, but does not help much when it comes to imposing security and order, as shown in table V.

Table IV. The Desirability of Democracy to Iraq

Completely unsuitable Completely suitable										
0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
105	**25**	**50**	**40**	**25**	**65**	**31**	**20**	**6**	**6**	**27**

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Table V. Assessment of Democratic System Performance

Statement	Totally agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally disagree	NA
Under a democratic system, the country's economic performance is weak	**47**	**67**	**106**	**101**	**19**	**65**
Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems	**103**	**107**	**67**	**82**	**23**	**18**

Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability	**92**	**89**	**66**	**113**	**18**	**22**
Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than others	**123**	**151**	**51**	**50**	**6**	**19**

Source: prepared by the researcher based on surveying 400 households in Baghdad, December 2019 – Jan 2020

Discussion:

The waves of populism in Iraq demonstrated that each concept of populism, ideational, discursive, and mobilization strategy, depends rather on the political context. Hence, Saddam's regime populism was rather discursive, utilizing Islamist rhetoric despite framing himself as a Pan-Arab. The post-2003 ethno-sectarian populism could be better explained through the ideational concept, where the "good" people are identified through ethno-sectarian lenses. Eventually, the 2014 populism could only be understood through a political mobilization strategy, as insiders articulate anti-establishment rhetoric to mobilize disenfranchised masses. Therefore, a broad definition of populism as "illiberal democracy" could better capture modern populism, given that 'democratic actors' in the sense of registering their parties and running elections resort to populism as an illiberal practice to mobilize the masses at the expense of the image and norms of democratic system.

These three waves of populism are somewhat interlinked. The first wave of populism of pre-2003 imposed a simplistic and adversarial mindset among the people, as well as ended all organizational capacities, whether partisan or civilian, as Saddam Hussein perceived any mobilization as a threat to its authoritarian regime.

Saddam's regime utilized violent rhetoric and brutal practices, as well as weaponized jokes, to create an adversarial mindset among Iraqis to the degree of fearing their own sons. Saddam's regime also brutally repressed all rival parties, including the Dawa Islamic Party, therefore ending any political entities with the capacity to mobilize the masses.

Without organizational capacities, political elites of post-2003 invested in identity politics. Identity politics helped establish support and, to some extent, loyalty to these political elites. This support was clear in the first parliamentary elections, where voter turnout was the highest 79.63 with the three top lists running identity-based elections. The first list was the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) obtaining 128 out of 275 for representing Shia, The Kurdistan Alliance was second, obtaining 53 seats for representing Kurds, and Tawafuq Alliance came third, obtaining 44 for representing the Sunnis. Identity politics was not only an electoral mobilization strategy but rather a governing approach (Dodge & Mansour 2020, 58 – 69). The diminishing influence of identity politics in the eyes of constituents and intra-rivalry in the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish landscape, incentivized some insiders to invest in widespread dissatisfaction instead of sectarian politics by attacking the establishment and adopting banners of reforms.

The empirical evidence demonstrated the high level of populism in Iraq, where people centrism and anti-elite sentiment were quite dominant, 95% to 70%. This was even reflected in the patterns of political participation, where joining protests, not joining parties, dominates the forms of participation, and only 16% contact elected officials. The empirical evidence demonstrated the risk of raising populism, as the survey showed that 28.3% of the sample has authoritarian nostalgia, a sentiment which is more pervasive among those witnessed both pre and post-2003 (28 years old and higher), those who work in the private sector and have higher income levels. Another concerning trend is that 61.25% think democracy is not suitable for Iraq.

The empirical study showed that democracy as a model is still favorable but claimed not suitable to Iraq. this is a significant drop from the 2012 nationwide survey, where the majority of participants located their responses around the center (Hoffman 2012). Also, the current system is being labeled as non-democratic. A more concerning finding is that respondents reported that the government's core responsibility is ensuring law and order (55%) and job creation (29.5%), and only 15% combined believe media freedom and fair elections are core responsibilities of government. This obviously indicates declining trust in the practice of democracy (freedom of journalism and fair elections contested by multi-party) for the sake of "performance" on security and jobs.

Conclusion:

This paper challenged the assumption that post-2003 Iraq should be studied in isolation from the pre-2003 era by demonstrating that the dynamics of populism rather took root during Saddam's era, followed by 2003 that created populism actors, who eventually adopted "nationalist populism" as a mobilization strategy for attracting the enfranchised voters.

This paper attempted to show the causal mechanisms where authoritarian populism both creates an adversarial and moral mindset and, at the same time, ends political structures with any prospect of mobilization. Hence, post-authoritarian political elites lack any effective organizational structures and resort to identity to mobilize constituencies. The politicization of identities undermines their relevance to the broader public in light of missing performance and accountability, incentivizing political insiders to adopt populism as a mobilization strategy.

Any successful efforts to address the ramifications of populism and enhance the system's legitimacy should start with institutional reforms by moving from mere representation towards accountability. However, institutional reforms by itself is not sufficient if not followed by efforts to regulate the practices of political actors and have a supportive political culture. For example,

political actors should not be allowed to use violence/intimidation to influence voting behavior. On the other hand, voters should prioritize programs and policies over their ethno-sectarian identities and tribal affiliations.

Further studies should be conducted to recommend applicable policies towards enhancing state's legitimacy in all three aspects of institutional reforms, political practices, and political culture.

Annex I. Demographics of Sample

Table I. Geographic distribution of the sample

District	Eligible vote	Percent	# of Participants	Percent
Mada'in	257,984	5	20	5
Adhamiya	718,532	13	53	13
Al Resafa	1,253,832	23	93	23
Sadr City I	472,510	9	35	9
Sadr City II	345,970	6	25	6
Tarmia	75,944	1	6	2
Kadhmiyah	608,188	11	45	11
Karkh	1,208,181	22	88	22
Mahmoudiya	227,813	4	21	5
Abo Ghraib	179,106	3	14	4
Total	5,398,060	100	400	100

Chart I. Age groups distribution

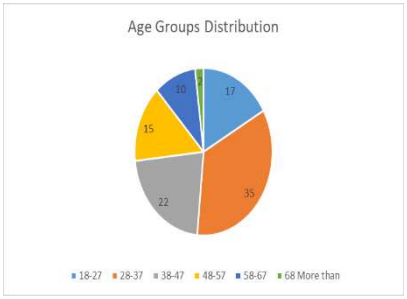
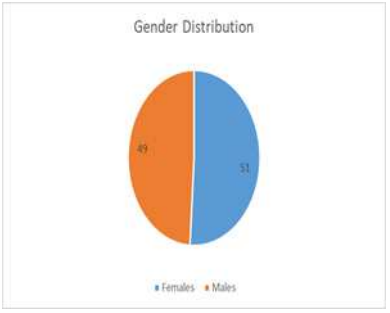


Chart II. Gender distribution



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