

DESPOTS OR DEMOCRATS?: SISTANI, SADR AND SHIA POLITICS IN POST-SADDAM IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

Since the invasion of Iraq by the US-led ‘Coalition of the Willing’ in 2003 the nation has shifted rapidly from a totalitarian state governed by a brutal dictator to a fledgling democracy. Central to this shift have been several Shia religio-political movements, who have frequently employed democratic mechanisms to promote greater inclusion, diversity and debate. For example, some of the strongest cries for democratic elections came from Sistani, while other hard-line Islamists like Sadr have utilized the power of mass demonstrations and petitions to frequently challenge the central government. This project therefore aims to assess the genuine engagement of Sistani and Sadr with democratic principles and the ways they have negotiated these alongside their Shia religiosity. It also aims to examine the consequences this has had for the wider political situation across the nation, especially in the wake of the current political impasse that has emerged in Iraq since the March 2010 elections. In order to achieve these goals, this paper will examine in detail the political rhetoric, campaigns, media, religious edicts and political jockeying of these two critical Shia religio-political figures. It seeks to address whether such moves are indicative of a genuine shift towards democracy or a cynical use of majoritarianism to seize power; are they despots or democrats?

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The issue of Middle Eastern / Islamic democracy became a point of much contention throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Here, scholars such as Samuel P. Huntington, Bernard Lewis, Martin Kamrava and others remained adamant that Islam was simply incompatible with democracy (Huntington, 1998 [1996]; Kamrava, 1998; Lewis, 1988). Among such accusations of “Oriental despotism” (Isakhan, 2008a), a particular vehemence was reserved for Shia Islam whose emphasis on the blood-line of the Prophet Muhammad’s nephew, Ali, was seen to preclude them from practicing democracy. In addition, Shia politics was generally understood to be a movement of religious piety that maintained a rigid separation between the spiritual and temporal worlds. The Shia clergy were understood to practise “quietism”, distancing themselves from politics and historically the Shia had only held power in a handful of isolated epochs as opposed to the dominant Sunni sect.

However, since the Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1979, as well as democratic developments among the Shia of Lebanon and the rise of Hezbollah, the traditional orthodoxy on Shia religiosity and democracy has been brought under heavy criticism. Today, the Shia make up about 15 percent of the world’s Muslims (around 200 million followers worldwide). It is the majority Islamic sect in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Azerbaijan and there are significant minorities in Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Qatar, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Among the many questions plaguing the Middle East and its prospects for peace and stability is that of how exactly the Shia will engage with democracy in the twenty first century.

Perhaps nowhere is this question more pertinent than in Iraq, where several Shia Arab political parties and actors have emerged as major political powerbrokers since the downfall of the Baathist state. Despite the fact they have always been the majority in modern Iraq, the Shi'a have long been marginalized by the central Sunni-led government and therefore produced a number of active oppositional movements. This arguably began with something of a Shia political renaissance that occurred in Iraq around the 1950s under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr (1935–1980). He founded the enormously popular *Hizb Al-Da'wah Islamiyya* ('The Islamic Calling', or more commonly referred to as *Da'wah*, the 'Calling') around 1957. The party was expressly designed to combat the growing power of secular movements in Iraq such as the Iraqi Communist Party and the Baath (Davis, 2008: 14; Stansfield, 2007: 61; Tripp, 2000: 160). Although Baqr Al-Sadr envisaged an Islamic Republic, his vision was of a state ruled not by clerics, but by the combination of *sharia* (Islamic law) and also by *shura* (consultative government) (Mallat, 1993), an important distinction which has long divided Iraqi and Iranian Shia scholars (Jabar, 2002; Litvak, 1998; Nakash, 2003 [1994]).

In fact, the Da'wah party was to go on to have a substantial impact on the domestic politics of Iraq throughout the second half of the twentieth century, repeatedly challenging the central government, including several assassination attempts on Saddam Hussein and other senior Baath party members. Not surprisingly, Saddam banned the organisation and, in 1980, he ordered the arrest, torture and execution of Baqr Al-Sadr, for having supported the Shia-led Islamic Revolution in Iran (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004: 124-127). During the 1990s, the Da'wah movement continued under the authority of Baqr Al-Sadr's brother-in-law, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq Al-Sadr, a charismatic and militant leader who sought to revitalise the Shia and engage them in political agitation against the state. Saddam reacted predictably and had Sadiq Al-Sadr assassinated in 1999 (Ehrenberg, McSherry, Sanchez, & Sayej, 2010: 317; Stansfield, 2007: 61-62).

The persecution of Da'wah by the Baathist state had several important consequences for Shia politics in Iraq, all of which have become significant in the post-Saddam era. The first is that during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, many senior members of the party fled to Tehran and formed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, which was renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq [ISCI] after the Baathist regime was toppled) in 1982 under the leadership of senior Iraqi cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Bakir Al-Hakim (Baram, 1998: 52). From the safety of Iran, SCIRI was able to set up a virulent opposition movement that repeatedly advocated the overthrow of the secular Baathist regime.

Another major consequence of the persecution of the Da'wah was that the assassination of Sadiq Al-Sadr in 1999 delivered a loyal following to his son, Moqtada Al-Sadr. However, Moqtada Al-Sadr, unlike his prestigious predecessors, was very young and lacked any formal religious education. He instead relies on religious advice from an Iraqi cleric exiled in Iran, Ayatollah Kazem Al-Haeri who is a firm believer in the doctrine of Khomeini and is based in Qom (Chaulia, 2007).

Paralleling these developments, the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Al-Sistani, who comes from a different line of Shia theologians, was gradually ascending the ranks of the clergy to become the pre-eminent Shia cleric or *marja* in Iraq in 1992. As early as 1995, Sistani was advocating Muslim involvement in democratic politics. For example, in a statement that still appears on his website under the title of "A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West: Dealing with laws in Non-Muslim countries" rule 223 states:

At times the higher interests of the Muslims in non-Muslim countries demand that Muslims seek membership of political parties, enter parliaments, and representative assemblies. In such cases, it is permissible for Muslims to engage in such activities as much as is demanded by the interest [of the Muslim community] that must be identified by consulting the trustworthy experts. (Al-Sistani, 1995: 223)

With the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 by the US-led coalition, came new opportunities for the varying Shia factions within Iraq. Since the elections of 2005, they have become the first ever Shia dominated political authority in the modern Arab world. Today, Shia Iraqi politics are dominated by the actions of Da'wah and ISCI. For example, Nuri Al-Maliki, the incumbent Prime Minister of Iraq is also the head of Da'wah and Adil Abdul-Mahdi is both the First Vice President of Iraq and the deputy head of ISCI. What is particularly interesting however, is the fact that to a significant degree both of these parties – indeed, all Shia politics – derive much of their legitimacy from the approval and edicts issued by a small handful of religious leaders based in both Iran and Iraq (Duss & Juul, 2009: 9). While these figures do not govern directly, they play an important role in dictating what policies are within the confines of religious law or acceptable to their devotees. Perhaps foremost among these Shia religious figures are the fire-brand Sadr and the more measured Sistani. While they have both, at times, proven to be exemplars of the very principles of democracy, their hard-line Islamism and pro-Shia partisanship has also at times stood in the way of dialogue and democratic reform.

Not surprisingly, a handful of scholarly studies have sought to address this phenomenon. These include two important studies by Juan Cole that examine the relationship between the United States and their democracy promotion agenda, and the Shiite religious establishment who played such a crucial role in the unfolding story of democracy in Iraq from 2003-2005 (Cole, 2003, 2006). Similarly, Ruel Marc Gerecht has argued that the Shia clerics are more likely to spread Islamic forms of democracy than Muslim moderates or reformists, or the regions secularists, all of whom lack street credibility (Gerecht, 2004a, 2004b). Furthering this, the Iranian dissident intellectual Abdol Karim Soroush has argued that should the Shia majority come to power in Iraq they are likely to swing global Shia sentiments towards democracy and away from the clerical and oppressive model adopted in Iran (Soroush, 2004).

More recently, a handful of seminal studies have emerged which deal with these issues in greater length and depth. For example, Vali Nasr's *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* argues that Shia movements are gaining strength across the region after the fall of Saddam as they witness the crucial role that the Shia are playing and the unprecedented power they have gained via democracy in Iraq (Nasr, 2007 [2006]). This is brought into focus in two other books, Yitzhak Nakash's *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* and Laurence Louer's *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, both of whom build on Nasr's assessment to further the notion that Iraqi Shiism since 2003 is playing a dramatic role in reforming the region (Louer, 2008; Nakash, 2007). Focusing specifically on Moqtada Al-Sadr, Patrick Cockburn has argued that despite consistent efforts to demonise him, Sadr is in fact the most important political figure to have emerged in post-Saddam Iraq and that his actions have long kept the US and the Iraqi government in check (Cockburn, 2008).

Despite the strength of the existing literature on this topic, little work has been done which aims to assess the genuine engagement of Sistani and Sadr with democratic principles and the ways they have negotiated these alongside their Shia religiosity. Building on earlier work by the author, this paper aims to address this lacuna by closely examining Iraqi democracy (Isakhan, 2007, 2008b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). It also seeks to examine the consequences that the actions of Sistani and Sadr have had for the wider political situation across the nation, especially in the wake of the current political impasse that has emerged in Iraq since the March 2010 elections. In order to achieve these goals, this paper will examine in detail the political rhetoric, campaigns, media, religious edicts and political jockeying of these two critical Shia religio-political figures. It seeks to address whether such moves are indicative of a genuine shift towards democracy or a cynical use of majoritarianism to seize power; are they despots or democrats?

SISTANI: QUIETISM, FATWAS AND POLITICAL PRESSURE

In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, Sistani was initially invited to meet with intermediaries of the United States in the hope that he would call for the Shia to cooperate with the occupational forces. Interestingly, Sistani declined even to meet with the US, citing his belief that religious clerics are not to interfere with politics (Feldman, 2005: 3). However, Sistani soon broke with this quietist tradition and issued a series of *fatwas* (religious edicts) that went beyond the spiritual to deal with the temporal realm. This began with those that called for an end to the looting of the country, a cessation of all revenge killings of members of the former Baathist regime and those which urged the immediate return of all stolen property (Ehrenberg, et al., 2010: 320). These were followed by other statements, sometimes delivered by his son, Mohammed Reda Ali Al-Sistani or as replies to newspaper or online questions which took on an increasingly political dimension. The first, issued in April 2003 (the same month that the US successfully captured Baghdad) stated: “Our country must be governed by its people, by its best children. It is for Iraqis to choose who governs, we want them to control the country” (Al-Sistani cited in Ehrenberg, et al., 2010: 320). However, perhaps Sistani’s most well known *fatwa* came in reaction to the plans of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to install a puppet government in Baghdad. Reasoning that a greater involvement of the Shia majority in Iraqi politics would rectify the power imbalance that had swung in favour of the Sunni minority since the inception of the state in 1921 (Al-Rahim, 2005: 50), Al-Sistani stepped up his religio-political campaign on 25 June, 2003 in a *fatwa* that read:

In the Name of The Almighty,
Those forces have no jurisdiction whatsoever to appoint members of the Constitution preparation assembly. Also there is no guarantee either that this assembly will prepare a constitution that serves the best interests of the Iraqi people or express their national identity whose backbone is sound Islamic religion and noble social values. The said plan is unacceptable from the outset. First of all there must be a general election so that every Iraqi citizen who is eligible to vote can choose someone to represent him in a foundational Constitution preparation assembly. Then the drafted Constitution can be put to a referendum. All believers must insist on the accomplishment of this crucial matter and contribute to achieving it in the best way possible.
May Allah The Blessed Almighty, guide everyone to that which is good and beneficial.
Wassalamu alaikum warahmatullah wabarakatuh
(Peace and Allah’s love and blessings be upon you)
Signed & Sealed
Ali Al-Hussaini Al-Seestani
25 Rabiul-Akhar 1424
26 June 2003
(Al-Sistani cited in Feldman, 2005: 6)

Not surprisingly, a handful of scholars have noted the profoundly democratic nature of this *fatwa*. Vali Nasr is impressed by the lack of “fiery invocations of divine wrath or Khomeini-style denunciations of the United States as the ‘Great Satan,’” and by the *fatwas* “calm arguments...about pragmatism, rights, democracy and self-determination” (Nasr, 2007 [2006]: 175). Babk Rahimi takes this a step further by claiming that Sistani was in effect cultivating “grassroots political participation to enhance civil society” that in turn could “produce a democratic order in which public Islam is compatible with not only the principles of inclusion, competition and accessibility but also with the basic logic of democratic governance—namely accountability and popular sovereignty” (Rahimi, 2004). Noah Feldman added that “The fatwa was pure democratic theory, with nary a reference to Islamic legal texts” but instead was based on his own reasoning which was “essentially indistinguishable from those of any competent international lawyer” (Feldman, 2005: 6). Finally, As Ruel Marc Gerech has pointed out, the *fatwa* was less of a religious edict and more of a

“flawlessly secular proclamation that clearly and consistently established ‘the people’ as the final arbiters of Iraq’s political system” and that it “may well represent Iraq’s best hope for a successful transition to democracy” making Sistani and his Shia followers “perhaps the most important actors in modern Middle Eastern history” (Gerecht, 2004a).

Although the CPA at first underestimated the importance of such a *fatwa*, it went on to have a profound effect of the US plans for democracy in Iraq as they were now forced to appease Sistani’s demands. Although a transitional assembly was put in place by the US and not by elections, these people would not have any guarantee of lasting power in Iraq and would not write the constitution. Instead, they would prepare the way for national elections in January 2005 which would in turn see an elected body responsible for drafting the Iraqi constitution. Although this was a significant compromise for the world’s last remaining superpower to make to a little known religious figure in Najaf, it was not enough for Sistani who demanded that the US seek UN approval for their plan. Amazingly, even though the entire world – including pleas from their closest ally, Tony Blair – had been unable to bring the US before the United Nations, Sistani succeeded and the US was forced to seek UN involvement and approval of their plan for democracy-building in Iraq (Feldman, 2005: 7-8).

However, this was still not enough for Sistani who wanted guarantees that the US was not going to further delay or manipulate Iraqi democracy. To bolster the significance of his point and to indicate its popularity among the Iraqi Shia majority, the cleric called for the faithful to protest in mid-January 2004. More than 100,000 Shia marched through Baghdad while a further 30,000 took to the streets of Basra (Walker, 2005). Put simply, they demanded democracy. They called on the US occupation to conduct free and fair national elections that would enable the people of Iraq to nominate an Iraqi legislature. They waved flags and chanted, ‘Yes, yes to unification! Yes, yes to voting! Yes, yes to elections! No, no to occupation!’ (cited in Jamail, 2004). Some carried banners with slogans such as ‘We refuse any constitution that is not elected by the Iraqi people’, while one protestor told reporters that, ‘If America won’t give us the democracy they promised, we will make it for ourselves’ (cited in Jamail, 2004). Demonstrating the power of the cleric these protests remained peaceful according to his instructions and when he announced that he had agreed to wait for a UN Fact-finding Team to study the situation, the protestors disbanded just as quickly as they had been assembled (Finn, 2004)

Shortly after the UN had issued their Report on the Feasibility of Elections in Iraq in February of 2004, Sistani’s website responded:

The religious authority demands clear guarantees – like a UN Security Council resolution – that elections will be held on the set date so that the Iraqi people will be reassured that this issue will not be subject to further delay. The religious authority also demands that the unelected authority, to which power will be handed over on 30 June, should be an interim administration with clear and specific authorities to prepare the country for free and fair elections. (Al-Sistani cited in Ehrenberg, et al., 2010: 321)

Sistanis pro-democracy campaign continued in the lead up to the January 2005 elections for a transitional government. This time, Sistani issued another series of politically-motivated *fatwa*’s urging his clergymen to get involved in local politics and encouraging the faithful, including women, to protest key decisions and vote in elections. Sistani also played a critical role in uniting the divergent political factions of the Iraqi Shia population – including Sadr, ISCI and Da’wa – under the banner of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Once again, Sistani’s political acumen foresaw that by bringing the varying Shia factions together they would be able to garner a high turn out at the polls and subsequently wield significant power (Duss & Juul, 2009: 11). This enabled Sistani to maintain his quietist religious credentials while at the same time wielding significant political power. Indeed,

despite his close involvement in politics he maintained a considerable distance from day-to-day debate, and continued to assert his preference “that clerics mostly leave the running of the state to lay persons” (Murphy, 2005). This meant that when Maliki’s government was eventually formed, although they did not owe any formal allegiance to Sistani, they continued (and continue today) to derive significant legitimacy from his support, as can be attested by the fact that many senior political figures in Iraqi politics – from all persuasions, but especially the Shia - continue to consult with him on important matters of state.

In 2007 during the height of the sectarian violence that had rapidly increased in the wake of the bombings of the revered Shia Al-Askari mosque in Samarra, Sistani was the voice of moderation and calm, calling for “closer bonds of love and friendship between the people of this nation, and not least to work on peaceful coexistence among them based on mutual respect and away from sectarian rivalries and bickering and sectarian whatever their subjects may be” (Sistani cited in Ehrenberg, et al., 2010: 323). In 2008, Sistani issued a series of statements relating to the US-Iraqi security agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement in the hope that these agreements would see the withdrawal of all US troops and the return of full Iraqi sovereignty (Duss, 2008).

Most recently, following the political stalemate that has emerged after the March 2010 elections, Sistani has urged the political parties to make progress and form a government in order to ensure stability and security. One Sistani spokesman, Abdul Mahdi Al-Karbalai, issued a statement on the clerics behalf demanding that the “negotiations and discussions must be stepped up, and the political blocs must know the importance of time in reaching an agreement” (Al-Karbalai cited in Zahra, 2010). He added that “the political blocs must show flexibility in their demands and must let all Iraqi groups take part in serious negotiations” and hoped that ministers would be chosen “according to adequacy and honesty, and the ability to do all the required duties, and not according to political allegiance” (Al-Karbalai cited in Zahra, 2010). Along these lines, Sistani has met with many key Iraqi politicians, including representatives of Al-Iraqiya. The Al-Iraqiya coalition won 91 seats at the election, while Maliki’s State of Law coalition won 89 seats, both well short of the 163 seats needed to form a government. In Sistani’s meeting with the secular Al-Iraqiya list, he stressed, according to another spokesman, “that the formation of the government is subject to dialogue between political blocs according to the mechanism set by the constitution” (Al-Khaffaf cited in Zahra, 2010).

The fact that Sistani is being consulted by the representatives of Iraq’s prominent secular-nationalist coalition which includes many Sunni politicians – and the coalition which received the most votes – is further evidence of his power over the political landscape of post-Saddam Iraq. Perhaps an even greater indication is that US President Obama is reported to have sent a “secret letter” to Sistani urging him to “prevail upon Iraq’s squabbling politicians to finally form a new government” (Slavin, 2010). According to *Foreign Policy*, “It was a request for his [Sistani’s] intervention in the political situation to use his influence with the Shiite groups and get them to compromise” (Slavin, 2010). Indeed, there is more than good chance that Sistani will play a critical role in the formation of the next Iraqi government and that his input and advice will continue to underpin much of Iraq’s political future.

SADR: PROTESTS, SOCIAL WELFARE AND POLITICAL POSTRUING

However, if it is the measured tones and democratic rhetoric of Sistani that have enabled him significant influence over post-Saddam Iraqi politics, the younger, more radical Moqtada Al-Sadr has used entirely different means to gain both notoriety and political influence in Iraq today. From the very earliest days of the occupation, Sadr has been vitriolic in his critique of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, he has repeatedly called for a complete US withdrawal, he has threatened and undertaken military action, and he has advocated the instalment of clerical rule based

on the Iranian model. He has also claimed that women without headscarves, people selling alcohol or cinema operators would be punished by his vigilantes (Feldman, 2005: 4). In addition, Sadr has launched routine verbal attacks on other elements of the Shia religious authority, including Sistani for his quietism in the face of occupation (Duss & Juul, 2009: 10). Such threats became very real in April 2003 when Sadr's forces killed the moderate cleric Ayatollah Abd Al-Majid Al-Khoi upon his return to Iraq from exile in London. Immediately after the assassination, Sadr's forces surrounded the home of Sistani and demanded that he leave Iraq, with only the speedy mobilization of Sistani's devotees saving the cleric (Chaulia, 2007). Such fire-brand rhetoric and military action garnered him rapid popularity among the poor, dispossessed and devout Shia under classes, particularly in Baghdad. The Shia dominated quarter of Baghdad was quickly renamed from Saddam-city to Sadr-city after the fall of the former dictator. As Patrick Cockburn puts it "He is the Messianic leader of the religious and political movement of the impoverished Shia underclass whose lives were ruined by a quarter of a century of war, repression, and sanctions" (Cockburn, 2008: 199).

Sistani's own politico-religious campaign gathered considerable momentum when the CPA forced the closure of two organs produced by Sadr, the newspaper *Al-Hawza* (which is also the name of the Shia seminary in Najaf where a number of leading clerics teach) and the quarterly journal *Al-Mada* ('The View'). Both of these publications appear to have represented Al-Sadr's political and theological ideology, advocating an Islamic republic for Iraq and featuring vitriolic critiques of Israel and the American-led occupation (Rosen, 2004). Specifically, *Al-Hawza* was targeted for featuring articles with headlines such as 'America Hates Islam and Muslims' and its closure prompted thousands of protestors to gather at the paper's office in central Baghdad. Despite being relatively peaceful at the time, the protestors chanted slogans such as 'No, no, America!' and 'Where is democracy now?' also vowing to avenge *Al-Hawza*'s closure (Al-Sheikh, 2004; Gettleman, 2004). In a twist of irony, it was the forced closure of *Al-Hawza*, rather than anything printed across its humble pages, which ultimately garnered Sadr renewed reverence amongst his already loyal followers and arguably incited his militia, the *Jaysh Al-Mahdi* (or *Mahdi Army*), to violence (Isakhan, 2009).

Indeed, throughout 2004 Sadr led several military uprisings against the occupational forces and Sunni insurgents (Etherington, 2005). These events brought Sadr a sudden notoriety; they helped refine his mastery of anti-occupation political rhetoric and distinguished him from Sistani as a strong militant religious leader who had both the strength and the gall to take on the United States. However, when his military campaigns consistently failed, Sadr employed a new arsenal of weapons in his struggle against the occupation from 2005 onwards. Adopting a model akin to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Sadr enacted a dramatic shift in approach from armed resistance to (mostly) non-violent political struggle, an evolution in rhetoric that saw him change from fire-brand pro-Shia Islamism to calls for tolerance, national unity and social inclusion, and the effective transformation of the *Mahdi Army* from militia to social welfare organisation (Yaphe, 2008: 3). In Sadr city, the political arm of his organisation, the Sadr Trend (or Sadrist Movement), began to organise their own religious courts, to organise various social services including the supply of potable water, health care and food distribution, began conducting law enforcement operations, and set up a handful of prisons.

As part of this shift, Sadr, following in the footsteps of Sistani, began to capitalize on his enormous support base and mobilized them regularly in co-ordinated protests across Iraq. For example, on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq (April 2005), Sadr effectively orchestrated massive protests in Baghdad. His supporters marched the 5 kilometres from Sadr city to Firdos square where the US had torn down the giant bronze statue of Saddam in their attempt to look like the liberators and not the invaders of Iraq in 2003. Thousands travelled from all over the nation to attend these peaceful protests making them one of the largest political rallies in Iraqi history (Jasim, 2005). They chanted anti-occupation slogans while a statement read on behalf of Sadr claimed, 'We want a stable

Iraq and this will only happen through independence... There will be no security and stability unless the occupiers leave... The occupiers must leave my country' (Sadr cited in Al-Khairalla, 2005).

What was particularly interesting here was that Sadr ordered his followers to only wave Iraqi flags and not those of the *Mahdi Army* or other Shia Arab organisations. This was a self-conscious attempt to move the protests beyond a pro-Sadr, Shia-backed movement to more of a nationalist struggle against occupation, something which would appeal to Iraqis of all persuasions. At the time, a spokesperson for Sadr, Sheikh Abdul-Hadi Al-Daraji is reported to have said, 'Many of our brothers, including Sunnis, have welcomed the call and will take part' (Al-Daraji cited in "Anti-US protest mark anniversary of Saddam's overthrow," 2005). This was to prove true with a number of Sunni Arabs attending the Baghdad protests as well as a small contingent of Iraqi Christians. Concurrent protests were also coordinated by the Association of Muslim Scholars in the Sunni city of Ramadi and attended by around 5000 protestors (Carl, 2005). These massive anti-occupation protests, organized by Sadr, have become an ongoing annual event in Iraq with successful and largely peaceful demonstrations having been conducted each year since 2005 (Ahmed, 2009). In addition, the followers of Sadr have also organized several other demonstrations concerning more pragmatic problems. For example, in the Sunni Arab-dominated city of Samarra hundreds of Sadr's followers have repeatedly demonstrated against the lack of basic infrastructure and public services such as electricity, fuel, potable water, the high cost of ice and the increasingly bleak employment market.

Perhaps because of the popular support that such protests attracted or because of the political realities Iraq faced in the wake of the January 2005 elections, Sadr added another weapon to his evolving democratic arsenal, competing in elections. Although Sadr had earlier advocated an Iranian-style Islamic Republic, he understood, like Sistani, that US calls for democratisation could (and were) being cleverly used to bring the Shia to unprecedented degrees of political power in Iraq. In mid-2005 Sadr therefore announced that he would form a party and contest the December elections. However, despite having received assurances from various Iraqi government representatives that he would be welcomed into the political process, Sadr changed his mind, claiming that the democratic process in Iraq was corrupt because of the way that delegates were selected. Nonetheless, some Sadr representatives did run in the December election and garnered 29 of the 130 seats won by the United Iraqi Alliance in the 275 seat Council of Representatives (Duss & Juul, 2009: 3). This paid off. Like Sistani, the elections had brought Sadr considerable power in Iraq. He was now a "king-maker" and he played a critical role in the negotiations which eventually saw Nouri Al-Maliki installed to the position of Prime Minister.

More recently, in 2007 the *Mahdi Army* underwent a brutal civil war with their rivals, the military wing of rival Shia bloc ISCI, the *Badr Brigade*. This culminated in a series of clashes in August of 2007 when the two forces met in both Karbala and Najaf. Eventually, Sadr agreed to a ceasefire and his forces have been relatively peaceful since. As if to emphasise his non-violent credentials in March 2008, he launched a nation-wide civil disobedience campaign in response to a series of raids targeting the cleric's offices and the subsequent arrest of a number of members of his organization. In several key Baghdad neighbourhoods, such as Mahmoudiya and Yusufiya members of the *Mahdi Army* marched peacefully while in Abu Disher the streets were emptied, the stores closed and the schools vacated in protest (Tawfeeq, Wald, & Sterling, 2008). Then in October 2008, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets of Sadr city and in the south-eastern province of Missan in support of Sadr's expressed concerns about the Parliament's consideration of a new draft of the US-Iraqi Security pact that would extend US troop presence until 2011 ("Sadr Supporters Protest Planned US-Iraqi Security Agreement," 2008). When the Iraqi Government ignored their protests and signed the deal, Al-Sadr's followers re-appeared in the streets and a senior supporter of Sadr read a message the cleric had written at the rally which stated that:

This crowd shows that the opposition to the agreement is not insignificant and parliament will be making a big mistake if it chooses to ignore it... The government must know it is the people who help it in the good and the bad times. If it throws the occupier out, we will stand by it. (Al-Sadr cited in Chulov, 2008)

As of 2007, Sadr is believed to be studying in a religious seminary in Qom (Iran) in order to further his spiritual education. If he completes this training, his power-base will only increase as many devout Shia will look to him for his formal interpretations of the Qur'an and his ability to issue *fatwas*. The fact that Sadr is studying in Iran also raises serious questions about his ties to the Iranian regime and their ideology. Indeed, Iran is said to have been bank-rolling much of Sadr's movement and are alleged to have set up elite training camps just across the Iran-Iraq border to train the *Mahdi Army* (Raphaeli, 2004). In addition, the completion of his religious training would see Sadr become a credible threat to the formal Shia religious establishment under the guidance of Sistani.

Aware of his ever-growing power, speaking from Tehran in the lead up to the March 2010 elections, Sadr urged the Iraqi electorate to participate at the polls in order to end the foreign occupation, arguing that such participation was tantamount to resistance against the invaders. In a relatively non-partisan move, Sadr is reported to have called on "Iraqis to opt for the candidates who would best serve the nation and work for Iraq's liberation" ("Sadr urges Iraqi voters to pave way for US pull-out," 2010). Indeed, the recent election results demonstrate Sadr's continued popularity within Iraq as the Sadrist won about 40 of the National Iraqi Alliance's total of 70 seats in the 325 member Parliament. This once again elevated Sadr to the position of "king-maker", with a tight grip on the balance of power. Indeed, both Allawi and Maliki have had to negotiate with the National Iraqi Alliance and with Sadr in particular. Neither men have a very good relationship with Sadr – Maliki helped quash the *Mahdi Army* in 2007-08 in Basra and Allawi is a Shia secularist with a strong Sunni following who abhors Sadr's Iranian-backed Islamist agenda. The main fear of both politicians is that Sadr would not only wield increased political power moving forward but that he would continue to have strong ties to Iran and once again use his *Mahdi Army* against the state. Senior Iraqi government officials are opposed to a Hezbollah style system of a virtual religious state operating within Iraq (August, 2010). Nonetheless, Sadr's allegiance is critical to the legitimacy of both groups and to the stability of Iraq, Sadr is said to have rejected the prospect of another term for Maliki ("Maliki meets Kurdish leaders," 2010), and has therefore held recent talks with Allawi in July 2010 in Damascus. Here, Sadr is reported to have commented that Allawi was "ready to make concessions to put an end to Iraq's political crisis" and urged other parties to do the same "for the sake of the Iraqi public interest...so that the political process proceeds" ("Allawi seeks Iraq support from Sadr," 2010). As with Sistani, Sadr is likely to continue to wield significant power in Iraq and will inevitably play some role in installing the next government. More dangerously however, is the fact that Sadr may in fact be gaining strength and his ties to Iran, his religious training, his political support base and his military faction all pose legitimate concerns for Iraq's fledgling democracy.

CONCLUSION

While it would be stretching the limits of the term to refer to Sistani and Sadr as democrats, it would be similarly difficult to equate them with despotism. At the very least they have proven themselves to be intimately familiar with the trappings and protocols of democratic government and know how to employ its mechanisms to great effect. Both leaders realised very quickly that the Shia were the majority in Iraq and that by utilising their support base they would be able to wield considerable power. To do this, Sistani took the unprecedented step of issuing religious edicts that rejected US plans to install a puppet government and called upon the faithful to vote. Similarly, Sadr has been able to call on his legion of followers to protest against the occupation to great effect, he has also utilised other democratic mechanisms such as petitions, civil disobedience, social

welfare, and he has argued in favour of the power of the people. Together the actions of Sistani and Sadr contradict the common belief that Shia Islam is incompatible with democracy. In fact, the argument can be made that whatever the shortcomings of democracy in Iraq today it exists because Sistani and Sadr put up such virulent (and in the case of Sadr, militant) opposition to US occupation and the instalment of a puppet government.

However, there remain several serious concerns about Sistani and Sadr's role in Iraqi politics moving forward. Although Sistani is certainly the more moderate and the more democratic of the two, he wields a great deal of political influence for someone who is not formally elected by the Iraqi people. Indeed, while his ability to mobilise popular sentiment in Iraq has generally worked in favour of peace and stability, there remains a concern about what Sistani would do if a government less favourable to his establishment and the Shia majority was to gain power. In addition, Sistani's genuine commitment to democracy has to be questioned. Although he has proven himself to have remarkable political acumen and insight when it comes to democratic mechanisms, he remains a devoutly religious figure who is committed to religious guidance, not to democratic politics. Sistani's record in not actively resisting the Baath is indicative here and a stable authoritarian government would be arguably just as (or even more) appealing to Sistani than any troublesome and tedious democracy. While for now Sistani remains one of the best friends of democracy in Iraq, there are also concerns about his succession, particularly given his age (80) and the likelihood of Sadr completing his religious education.

The case of Sadr is even more troubling. Although his employment of some democratic mechanisms have surprised and impressed many in the "West", it is right to be cautious, even cynical, about Sadr's genuine commitment to democracy. Although his ancestors were highly critical of an Iranian-style regime, the likelihood that Sadr will look increasingly to Iran for support is very real. Further, his relative success in using military means to achieve political goals may see him revert to violence if his political demands are not met or if a government comes to power which is not favourable towards him. Similarly, his blatant use of majoritarian politics to gain power and his fire-brand ideology are not obfuscated by his steps towards democracy. He is likely to wield significant power in Iraq's future and whether or not he continues to align himself with democracy when it no longer suits his purposes remains to be seen.

These questions are critical not only to the current political impasse in Iraq, but also to the imminent draw-down of US troops in August 2010. Indeed, the ways in which the Shia continues to negotiate their religiosity and democracy will be critical to the future of this fledgling democracy post US-occupation. No matter which way Iraq turns from here, the roles played by both Sistani and Sadr will be critical.

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