

Two Decades of Democratic Doubt: Why Don't Iraqis Trust the Political Process?



On the 11th of this month, Iraqis head to the polls for the sixth time since 2005 but the general mood bears little resemblance to the “democratic transition” they were promised two decades ago.

Instead of electoral experience accumulating trust, the facts have accumulated doubt: doubt in the neutrality of the state, doubt in fair representation, doubt in the value of voting and even doubt that the results reflect what actually happened on election day.

This suspicion did not emerge out of thin air, but from a series of interconnected episodes that began with the Occupation Authority establishing the Iraqi Governing Council on a sectarian and ethnic quota basis rather than on the foundation of national will, then were sealed by a constitution drafted hastily and under pressure, followed by the absence of institutions stipulated by that constitution (such as the Council of the Union).

And then came further practices politicisation of the judiciary, the disqualification of candidates under the Accountability and Justice Law, assassinations or threats of rivals, armed-faction participation in civil elections, untransparent campaign spending all of which confirmed to the public that the “game” was larger than the ballot box.

Thus one can say that the problem in Iraq is not the presence of elections but the quality of the environment in which those elections take place because democracy is not measured by the number of election cycles, but by a voter’s ability to believe that his or her vote moves, un-distorted, from the box into the halls of power.

And when that chain is broken at the moment of drafting the constitution, interpreting the law, forming the government—a “skeptical electoral mindset” is born, which has become a component of Iraqi political consciousness since 2003.

In the following article I will attempt to unpack this skepticism, not as a negative mood or mere abstention, but as a rational political response to repeated scenes that made democracy in Iraq seem applied in form but constrained in substance.

Hence come the ten themes that follow: from the Governing Council, to the constitution, to the judiciary, to the weapon, to the lack of transparency ... seen as links in one chain that produced the current crisis of trust.

Governing Council and the Birth of the Norm of Quota and Doubt

The transitional Council established in July 2003 under U.S. occupation supervision was the first political experiment after the fall of the previous regime but it also became the first cornerstone in the birth of doubt in the political process. Its twenty-five members were appointed, not elected, based on a sectarian/ethnic formula: thirteen Shiites, five Kurds, four Sunni Arabs, plus representatives for Turkmen and Christians.

That formula, promoted at the time as a “national balance,” quickly hardened into a fixed political norm: the allocation of posts according to affiliation, not competence. Instead of building a new social contract, a system was established that divvied up quotas rather than enabling power circulation.

A report by the British think-tank Chatham House noted that this style of sectarian representation “entrenched corruption and deprived the state of its national reference.”

From that moment on, trust between Iraqis and the nascent political system was absent: it became clear that democracy in Iraq was not built on popular will but on externally imposed balances, and that the “electoral box” would be only a means to beautify a reality already divvied up. And so Iraqi democracy was born carrying inside it the seed of doubt that still grows today.

A Constitution Written Under Occupation

One year after the Governing Council, in 2005 the permanent Iraqi constitution was adopted amid a fraught political and security climate, under direct supervision of the U.S. occupation and the United Nations mission. Its drafting was rapid and troubled: the draft was drawn up in just a few months at a time when the country was deeply divided and virtually insecure.

While the constitution included ambitious provisions on freedoms and human rights, it was less the product of broad national consensus than a negotiated settlement between rival forces. The Kurdish forces pressed for a wide-ranging federal model, the Shiite forces pushed for a parliamentary system favouring the majority, while the Sunni forces argued that the text had been drafted in their absence and under time pressure.

A UN report in October 2005 noted that “the constitution-drafting process did not allow enough time for genuine public dialogue, weakening citizens’ sense of ownership.”

Despite the constitution’s stipulation to establish institutions such as a Council of the Union and an independent Federal Court, those provisions have yet to be implemented. Thus the constitution appeared from the start as a document born of coercion rather than a participatory environment, losing its sacred status as a binding social contract.

From here the detachment between constitutional text and political reality began, so that laws came to be interpreted according to the interests of dominant forces, and democracy in the eyes of many Iraqis became form without substance.

Control of the Judiciary and the Interpretation of Law to Disqualify Winners

One of the most visible manifestations of doubt in Iraq’s political process is the transformation of the judiciary from guarantor of legitimacy into a battleground for political conflicts. Instead of judicial rulings being the dividing line between right and wrong, they became for some Iraqis a tool used by dominant forces to

interpret laws in ways that serve power balances.

Many point to the 2010 election outcome, when the Iraqi National List led by Iyad Allawi secured 91 seats compared with 89 by the State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki. But the Federal Court's interpretation of "the largest bloc" gave the right to form the government not to the electoral winner but to the parliamentary-formed bloc after the vote.

This decision shifted the power balance and returned the premiership to Maliki a move criticised as a victory of political interpretation over constitutional text.

More than a decade later a similar scene played out in the 2021 elections: the Sadrist Movement won the largest number of seats, but complaints, appeals and alignments inside the judiciary and politics delayed government formation, culminating in the movement's withdrawal from parliament and boycott of the political process.

For many in the public, these episodes looked like the winner being removed by legal interpretations or political deals, deepening the conviction that popular will can be altered at the last minute.

It is true that the Iraqi judiciary includes judges recognised for competence and integrity, yet recurring crises at each election, multiple contradictory legal interpretations, and the politicising of cases all these factors have shaken confidence in justice.

When a voter feels that "who wins does not govern," and that legal interpretation can reallocate results, his belief that the ballot box is the sole route to change wanes.

The Accountability and Justice Law as a Political Purge Instrument

Since 2008, with the adoption of the Accountability and Justice Law (as a successor to the de-Ba'athification law), this legislation extended beyond transitional justice into a tool of political exclusion used at every electoral round. The law, designed to prevent former regime figures from returning to power, was often used to eliminate rivals or curb competitors without precise criteria or transparent judicial procedures.

A prominent example is Abdul-Ghani al-Assadi, one of the most respected leaders in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and former head of the Counter-Terrorism Service, who served nationally and internationally and commanded respect, yet when he sought election he was barred under the Accountability and Justice Law due to past military service under the previous regime, despite retirement years earlier and no formal conviction.

Many Iraqis saw in this painful irony: the man once celebrated as a national hero

was excluded by administrative decision when he sought to serve his country through politics.

He was not alone. The decision to bar also affected other civil and military figures, like Najm al-Jubouri, who was denied candidacy in Nineveh despite wide popularity, only for his status later to be reconsidered.

These and other cases confirmed in the public view that the law had ceased to be an instrument of justice and instead became a tool of political bargaining and that its implementation was subject more to party calculations than professional criteria.

Thus, the Accountability and Justice Law turned into a ready political scapegoat raised by dominant forces at every election to exclude rivals, deepening popular doubt in the integrity of the political process and establishing the belief that entering parliament depends not only on the ballot box, but on the balance of power and loyalties.

Political Assassination as a Means of Bloody Exclusion

Political assassination is not a random act but a coercive strategy used to remove a rival from the equation through force, turning the field of competition from politics into murder. This pattern has been clearly visible since the early post-2003 period, when the 2003 Najaf bombing assassinated a senior leader like Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, helping establish a climate of political terror and sectarian escalation at a time when the fragile state could not monopoly violence.

Contemporary examples show the phenomenon has not vanished: the assassination of the candidate Safaa al-Mishhadani in October 2025 near Tarmiya, north of Baghdad, demonstrated how assassination can target civilian candidates and rising leaders and alter electoral trajectories and frighten voters and candidates alike.

The direct result of political assassinations is not only the loss of human life, but the tightening grip of fear over political work: candidates withdraw or retire, party bases become paralysed, civil society pulls back to preserve safety.

In the Iraqi context, this reflects a bloody exclusion that undermines any chance of renewing elites via the ballot box and nurtures the belief that the armed hand still writes the rules of politics outside any constitutional or legal framework.

Lack of Transparency

There is a fundamental flaw in Iraq's campaign finance environment, reflected in the lack of disclosure of funding sources, the absence of effective oversight mechanisms, and high spending ceilings that have created an unproductive

financial race.

Specifically: the European Union Election Observation Mission noted clear gaps in the monitoring of spending and campaigns, with recommendations for greater transparency to avoid financial influence on electoral competitiveness.

Also, the spending ceilings set by the Independent High Electoral Commission (Iraq) in some provinces reached enormous sums for example in Baghdad, authorised election spending licences approached around one hundred million dollars opening the door to transfers and funding that authorities cannot easily track.

In light of general indicators of increasing corruption and weak accountability mechanisms (as shown by Transparency International and civil society reports), it becomes difficult to separate campaign advertising from networks of interests and deals run by parties and individuals with large resources, while smaller parties or independent candidates lack the tools for fair competition.

The practical result: the citizen sees an expenditure race with unknown sources and unchecked accountability, turning the ballot box from a device measuring public opinion into an element in a financial-political equation and this in turn undermines trust and fuels the feeling that elections are managed by money before being organised by votes.

Participation of Parties with Armed Wings in Elections

One of the most dangerous manifestations of the mingling of arms and politics in Iraq is the participation in elections of parties that possess armed wings thereby stripping the electoral process of its civil character and making it, in the eyes of many Iraqis, an unfair contest.

After 2003 many armed factions fought against Isis, then some of their leaders transformed into registered political parties such as Badr Organisation, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq forces that enjoy vast field influence and large financial and organisational resources.

Such participation creates a confusion between electoral legitimacy and military legitimacy; the citizen sees that a party which owns an armed apparatus is not competing on a platform or idea but on deterrence and influence that transcend ballot boxes.

International reports, including from Reuters and the European observation mission, confirm that the presence of armed wings for participating parties weakens the principle of equal opportunity and grants them undue advantage over civil and independent forces.

The result is that many candidates prefer to withdraw or avoid contesting those

forces, while a growing general sense arises that change via the box is impossible under the dominance of weapons. Thus the political participation of such factions turned into what might be called the “legitimate recycling of force,” in which elections are used to entrench influence rather than renew it making citizens see that the weapon remains the ultimate decider, not the will of the voter.

After twenty years of the Iraqi democratic experiment, it becomes clear that the problem is not the ballot box, but the system that surrounds it and drains it of meaning.

Elections have turned into a periodic ritual that sustains the system’s balances rather than the voter’s will, and into a formal façade for a state that has not yet settled its identity: is it a citizens’ state, or a state of components, or a state of parties sharing loyalty, power and money?

The crisis of trust in Iraq is not a political accident, but an institutional disease rooted in the absence of a genuine social contract that guarantees equality before law and defines the state’s responsibility to its citizens. Iraqis still feel that their voice is heard, but not acted upon; that the law applies, but only to those without protection; and that the state exists, but with one repeated substance: quota.

Perhaps the most dangerous legacy of this experience is that citizenship has been devalued in favor of sect, principle sacrificed for interest, and the weapon preceded the box. This erosion of faith in the idea of the state is what makes the doubt in democracy today not a passing mood but the expression of a wounded political consciousness that has yet to see a state that truly represents it.

Restoring trust does not begin with announcing new elections, but with re-founding the idea of governance: a state in which no one stands above the law, in which power is not measured by seats or weapons, but by the number of citizens who believe their country is their homeland, not their prey.

Only then can democracy heal from its doubt, and only then can the Iraqi go to the ballot box confident that their vote will not be neutralised in a deal, but will translate into a future.

In the end the question remains open not for politicians alone but for the entire society: do we want elections that reproduce the crisis, or a new national contract that redefines the meaning itself meaning that the state belongs to all Iraqis, not some of them?