

The Iraqi Communist Party 1934-1979

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Although condemned to a role of almost perpetual opposition, and brutally persecuted for the greater part of its existence, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) played a highly influential role in Iraqi politics, especially in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In spite of the various splits within its ranks, and the occasional absurdity of the poses forced upon it by external circumstances, its leaders were generally regarded and remembered as men of integrity and selflessness, prepared, on many occasions, to sacrifice their lives rather than compromise their ideals.

Officially, the British mandate over Iraq ended in 1932; in fact, British influence and a somewhat less overt British presence continued until 1958, when a military coup which became the Revolution of 1958 overthrew the monarchy and put an end to the *ancien régime*. As in many other parts of the colonised and semi-colonised world, the inter-War and post Second World War periods in Iraq were characterised by intense political activity, in which a variety of parties across the political spectrum made more or less common cause in attempts to rid their nations of imperial and colonial influence.

The Post-World War Two Period

One immediate consequence of the decisive role played by the Soviet Union in the Second World War was that Communist and leftist parties enjoyed some years of relative freedom before being pushed firmly back into the closet (or the prison cells) in the late 1940s and 1950s. Thus between late 1944 and the spring of 1946, sixteen labour unions, twelve of which were controlled by the ICP, were given licences, as well as a number of political parties. Subsequently, with the onset of the Cold War, a profound struggle began between the United States and the Soviet Union for control and influence over the Middle East. Among many important areas of contention, were, first, the desire of each superpower to gain strategic advantage, second, the fact that the region contained some two thirds of the world's oil reserves in a context where oil was becoming increasingly vital to the economy of the Western world, and third, the fact that, in a novel way which made it quite distinct from previous great power struggles, the Cold War represented an ideological conflict

between two very different political, social and economic systems.

The ICP's capacity to attract committed followers in the 1940s and 1950s thus became a matter of profound concern, not only to local religious and Arab nationalist parties, but also to the United States, for whom the mere mention of 'Communism' or 'Communists' produced a reaction out of all proportion to the actual strength or power of any Middle Eastern Communist party. In reality, apart from its emphasis on land reform, the ICP's programme contained many of the same references to democracy and civil liberties, the nationalisation of key sectors of the economy and the importance of promoting education and social welfare as the programmes of most contemporary Western European social-democratic parties. The ICP formed the largest and most coherent opposition organisation in Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s, and organised all the major demonstrations against the monarchy, notably against the revision of the treaty with Britain in January 1948 (*al-Wathba*), the strike in the oilfields leading to the march on Baghdad later that year (*al-Masira al-Kubra*), and the student demonstrations in Baghdad in November 1952 (*al-Intifada*).

The 1958 Revolution – Political Freedom and Restrictions

After the Revolution of 1958 (in which it did not participate directly), the ICP was able to come out into the open for the first time. In brief, while those who had been opposed to the old regime had generally agreed on what they did not want, there was far less agreement on how best to proceed under the new circumstances. In broad terms, the main divisions were Iraqist and socialist-social reformist on the one hand, and Arab nationalist and Nasserist on the other. The gradual consolidation of the regime of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim was accompanied by propaganda from

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Cairo and elsewhere to the effect that he was simply a tool of the Communists. The Ba‘th and the nationalists became the main focus of the opposition to Qasim, and many of the vested socio-political interests that had not been destroyed in July 1958 came to seek common cause with the Ba‘thists and pan-Arab nationalists. In fact, very few Communists ever had positions of real power; apart from the elevation of a single Communist and two leftists to minor cabinet posts between July 1959 and May 1961, Qasim never allowed ICP members or sympathisers to hold major positions of power in the government or the armed forces.

In brief, things gradually went from bad to worse, both for the left, and for Qasim himself. The nationalists and the Ba‘th gradually built up their organisation, and made crucial contacts within the army. Qasim had commuted the death sentence passed on his chief rival, ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, who was thus able to step into the wings in the wake of the coup of February 1963, when Qasim himself was overthrown and executed. While individual leftists had been murdered intermittently over the previous years, the scale on which the killings and arrests took place in the spring and summer of 1963 indicated a closely coordinated campaign, and it is almost certain that those who carried out the raid on suspects’ homes were working from lists of names supplied to them. It is generally accepted that some Ba‘thist leaders, most probably including Saddam Husayn, were in touch with American intelligence networks.

After a year or so, and in spite of the persecution to which it had been subjected, the ICP reluctantly accepted that ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif’s government was moving in a ‘positive’ direction. By the summer of 1964, both Egyptian-Soviet and Iraqi-Soviet relations had improved, and a modest programme of nationalisations was under way in Iraq. Of course, many of the ICP rank and file, both inside and exiled from Iraq, were upset at their leadership’s change of heart, since they considered the ‘Arif regime indistinguishable from the Ba‘th, and to have been equally responsible for the atrocities of 1963. One faction of the ICP espoused the doctrine of armed struggle, carrying out attacks against the regime from bases in the marshes in southern central Iraq. The terrain does not lend itself

to this sort of activity, and most members of the faction, the ICP-Central Command, were captured by government forces in the spring of 1969.

The ICP and the Ba‘thist Government

In August 1968, after the two coups of 17 and 30 July, the Ba‘th offered the ICP three ministerial portfolios. The ICP refused to participate in government unless full civil liberties were restored, political parties legalised and democratic elections held, demands to which the Ba‘th was either unable or unwilling to respond. Eventually, however, a Ba‘thist-Communist ‘Progressive National Front’ materialised in 1973. The ICP chose to interpret the Ba‘th’s increasing friendship with the Soviet Union, its apparent determination to arrive at an appropriate settlement of the Kurdish problem, and its desire to end the monopoly of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), as mounting and ultimately convincing evidence of commitment to a left-leaning political line. Especially after the nationalisation of the IPC in June 1972, the Ba‘thists appeared to be giving proofs of their political rectitude in a manner and to an extent that the ICP found difficult to continue to ignore.

The enormous increase in state revenues after oil nationalisation meant greater state expenditure in a rapidly expanding and developing economy, and thus almost unlimited opportunities for personal enrichment for those able to apply for a wide range of tenders offered in such fields as the construction of roads, schools and hospitals, and the equipment of what was virtually an entire industrial sector. Furthermore, protectionist policies, import controls, and the generous provision of cheap credit all enabled industrialists and businessmen to make substantial profits without having to risk either their own capital or foreign competition.

The ICP and the National Front

For a while, the legalisation of the ICP that accompanied the constitution of the National Front gave the Communists more freedom to disseminate party literature and to recruit new members. The Communist leaders also believed that they would be able to influence some of the Ba‘th leaders, particularly Saddam Husayn, who was now made out to

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be almost a second Castro, in view of his increasingly congenial initiatives in domestic and foreign affairs. With hindsight, the Communists' adherence to the Front seems an almost suicidal act, and indeed it appeared so at the time to many Iraqis, both Communists and non-Communists. For others, however, the presence of two Communist ministers in the cabinet, the ability to publish a weekly paper and a monthly discussion journal, greater freedom of manoeuvre, and the possibility, after over a decade of persecution, of a return to some semblance of normal life, seemed to represent substantial achievements. Many regarded the opportunities that now seemed to be presented as the beginning of a period in which the party would be able to rebuild and consolidate its cadres, and re-establish its links with the mass organisations with which it had been traditionally associated. For others, the Front held out the possibility of a return to Iraq, sometimes after years of exile abroad, with the added incentive of being able to engage in legal political activity.

The Ba'athists and the Kurds

A considerable degree of interdependence existed between the Ba'ath's relations with the Kurds and its relations with the ICP, in that an agreement with, or, as it turned, the defeat of, the Kurds, would greatly reduce its dependence on the Communists. Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) could not be fashioned into suitable coalition partners, and, unlike the ICP, the KDP was able to marshal large numbers of guerrilla fighters who could successfully engage, although probably not defeat, the Iraqi army. In December 1974, the Iranian army had bombarded Iraqi army positions from the Iranian side of the frontier, and the conflict had developed in such a way that it was in danger of escalating into an all-out war between the two states.

In the spring of 1975 preliminary meetings took place between representatives of Iran and Iraq, which ended with the conclusion of an agreement signed in Algiers at the beginning of March. The Iranians gradually removed their field guns, and the Kurdish resistance collapsed. The Kurdish movement, though not utterly crushed, was dealt a fearsome blow. For the Ba'ath, it meant the settlement of the Kurdish question on its own terms, as well as an

enormous boost to the authority of the regime as a whole and of Saddam Husayn in particular. The Agreement meant the 'final' resolution of a frontier dispute that had bedevilled relations between Iraq and Iran since the late 1930s; it was also a major landmark in the slow but definite process of Iraq's integration into the 'moderate' camp in the Arab world.

Iraq under Saddam Husayn

As a result of Iraq's enormous increase in income from oil, the regime, now coterminous with 'Saddam Husayn and his circle', was able to dispense patronage and contracts on an almost unlimited scale. The social welfare programmes, the subsidies on essential foodstuffs, the increases in wages and salaries and the new employment opportunities provided by the general expansion in economic activity in a country that was neither over-populated nor (at least initially) required a major importation of foreign labour, all helped to bring about rapid and visible improvements in living standards for the population as a whole, and undoubtedly encouraged a wide acceptance of the regime in many quarters in the early 1970s.

In the circumstances, the National Front's efficacy as a forum for political debate rather than as a rubber stamp for the regime did not long survive the Algiers Agreement. Initially, as the ICP had thrown its weight fully behind the Ba'ath, it refrained from criticising its policies. In fact, its participation in the Front actually created favourable conditions for the strengthening of Ba'athist rule, since it allowed the regime to build up its own organisations and institutions unopposed. In addition, the changing economic conditions meant that many of the ICP's traditional centres of support in the cities were now being swamped with migrants from a background with little tradition or experience of working class struggle.

Over the next few years, the Iraqi regime gradually loosened its ties with the socialist countries, moving into the general orbit of the West on a global level and towards the moderate Arab states on the regional level. Thus trade with the socialist countries as a proportion of Iraq's total foreign exchanges reached a peak of 13 per cent in 1974, and declined steadily to 2.6 per cent in 1981. This was accompanied by the almost exclusive concentration and

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accumulation of power in the hands of Saddam Husayn and a few particularly trusted subordinates. The Ba‘th party was thus no longer – if, indeed, it ever had been – a body in which policy discussions and debate took place, and became simply a further means of asserting the authority of Saddam Husayn. The expansion in its numbers also meant that it came increasingly to resemble a national rally in which the adulation of itself and the leadership came to take the place of whatever ideological discourse might once have existed.

The Post-1974 Period

The documents in this archive currently stop in 1974 due to the 30-year rule restricting British government files. After this date, the ICP suffered persecution and consequent decline. The widely expected turn against the ICP began at the end of 1975, when a number of party members were arrested, apparently at random, imprisoned briefly, often tortured, and then equally suddenly released. The ICP began to complain about this at the beginning of April 1976, and by June it was evident that its activities were becoming subject to greater restriction. The report of its Third Congress, held in Baghdad in May, contained the first unambiguous articulation of the party’s dissatisfaction with the Ba‘th. The ICP demanded that the National Front should be made genuinely representative of all ‘progressive forces and organisations’, and that the terms of the agreement between the two parties should also apply to the mass organisations, particularly the Federation of Trade Unions (Ittihad Niqabat al-‘Ummal), and the Peasant Unions (al-Jam‘iyyat al-Fallahiyya).

From this time onwards there was a steady deterioration in relations between the two parties, accompanied by an increasingly vitriolic propaganda campaign against the ICP, culminating in witch hunts comparable to those launched in 1963. Hitherto, ‘apolitical’ individuals had still managed to retain relatively important posts, but after 1976 even the most ‘harmless’ non- Ba‘thists were compulsorily retired. In March 1978, the ICP paper Tariq al-Sha‘b carried a series of articles criticising the regime’s policies on the Kurds and the economy, implying that it was moving too close to the West for its own good. In reply, an article in the Ba‘th newspaper al-Rasid accused

the Communists of being excessively subservient to Moscow. Three weeks later, twelve Communists were executed for allegedly carrying out political activity in the army. This ‘crime’ was apparently a contravention of the terms of the National Front, which had stipulated that it was a capital offence for any party other than the Ba‘th to carry out political or organisational activity in the armed forces.

At the end of May 1978 the Ba‘th daily al-Thawra warned members of the other political parties that ‘the revolutionary punishment of execution’ would be meted out to those who tried to penetrate the armed forces; in July the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) enacted a blanket decree making non-Ba‘thist political activity (such as reading the ICP’s newspaper) illegal for all former members of the armed forces, with the death penalty prescribed for offenders. Since Iraq had universal conscription, this provision meant that any adult male discovered engaging in non-Ba‘thist political activity was liable to be sentenced to death. In the summer and autumn, there were further executions of Communists and arrests of party members.

Over the next months and years, the regime tortured hundreds of thousands of its opponents to death in prison; people were dragged out of their houses and never seen again; in some cases, their bodies were thrown in front of their families’ houses, dreadfully mutilated; in others, relatives were forced to collect corpses from police stations, and jeered, abused or assaulted while doing so. By the time of Saddam Husayn’s seizure of the presidency in July 1979, such activities had long become routine, and were to characterise his regime until its overthrow in 2003. The ICP, once the proud vanguard organisation of Iraqi political life, dwindled into impotence and insignificance as a result of the regime’s all-encompassing paranoia, and as yet another casualty of Saddam Husayn’s determination to stay in power at any cost.

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