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‘ABD AL-KARIM QASIM

Sectarian Identities and the Rise of Corporatism in Iraq

Yâ wahdatnâ hilli hilli khalli al-isti‘mâr yuwalli
(Achieving unity will allow us to rid ourselves of imperialism)
Colloquial saying from the July 1958 Revolution

Perhaps no other issue is as controversial when evaluating the July 14, 1958 Revolution in Iraq as the legacy of its leader, Staff Brigadier ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. Fifty years after his death, Qasim remains an enigma. Loved by the poor, reviled by Pan-Arabists, and having enjoyed a revival after 2003, the strong opinions that Qasim has evoked from all segments of Iraqi society raise a number of important questions. What type of a political leader was Qasim? How should his political legacy be evaluated? Why have so many Iraqis viewed him in a nostalgic manner? What do answers to these questions tell us about contemporary Iraqi politics and the prospects for a stable, tolerant and pluralistic Iraq?

The questions relating to ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim’s legacy raise a still broader set of conceptual and theoretical issues that transcend a narrow focus on Iraqi politics and society. These questions include the power of memory to influence contemporary politics. If in fact the memory of a deceased political leader can be

Eric Davis*

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One of the important accomplishments of the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement was its ability to unite all Iraq’s ethnic and confessional groups in fighting British colonial rule. Resulted in a strong anti-colonial impulse. Urban nationalists, who constituted a core component of the June-October 1920 Revolution, emphasized anti-sectarianism, seeing in British policy a “divide and conquer” strategy that sought to set Iraq’s constituent ethnic and confessional groups against each other. One of the important accomplishments of the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement was its ability to unite all Iraq’s ethnic and confessional groups in fighting British colonial rule.

Qasim’s rule raises yet further questions about the relationship between the July 1958 Revolution and Iraq’s current efforts to build civil society and implement a transition to democracy. The Iraqi nationalist movement, that began during the late 19th century, but was particularly energized by the Young Turk Revolt of 1908, emphasized social justice which became a core component of nascent Iraqi understandings of democracy. Growing hostility to the Ottomans after 1908, and then towards the British when they occupied Iraq during World War I and refused to deliver on their promises of giving Iraq its independence, resulted in a strong anti-colonial impulse. Urban nationalists, who constituted a core component of the June-October 1920 Revolution, emphasized anti-sectarianism, seeing in British policy a “divide and conquer” strategy that sought to set Iraq’s constituent ethnic and confessional groups against each other. One of the important accomplishments of the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement was its ability to unite all Iraq’s ethnic and confessional groups in fighting British colonial rule.

Although the period between the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in Iraq and the July 1958 Revolution is often referred to as the “liberal age,” or what I would prefer to call the “liberal moment,” the Iraqi nationalist movement, both in its majority Iraqi, or local, nationalist form, or in its minority Pan-Arabist tendency, situated primarily in the Iraqi officer corps, failed to develop a discourse of individual rights and freedoms. While such rights were enshrined in the 1925 Organic Law, Iraq’s first constitution, and in the body of law developed through by Iraq’s highly professional and sophisticated judiciary, Iraqi
nationalists' concerns were focused on what we may call "group rights." Put differently, group or collective rights, namely the rights of the people (huquq al-sha'b), became the nationalist movement's primary focus, whether in Iraqist or Pan-Arab nationalism. Although this focus was understandable, this construction of politics helped pave the way for the corporatist form of political and social thought that came to dominate Republican regimes after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 by privileging the group while neglecting the rights of the individual.

Given this political backdrop, it is not surprising that the Qasim regime suppressed many freedoms that had existed under the Hashimite monarchy (1921-1958), such as the right to form political parties, press freedoms, aspects of due process, and the holding of parliamentary elections. All of this was done in the name of "the people," and the need to fight Western imperialism and colonialism.

(4) From a social justice perspective, the Qasim's regime was highly beneficial for Iraq. Qasim implemented many social reforms and promoted a political environment of tolerance for ethnic and religious diversity. How do we balance the positive contributions that the Qasim regime made, particularly improving the well being of Iraqis and addressing for the first time the problem of sectarian identities, with the suppression of individual rights and freedoms? Answering this question is key not only to evaluating Qasim's legacy, but to addressing a core issue facing democratic theory in the contemporary Arab world.

At the time of the July 1958 Revolution, many Iraqis, as well as Arab nationalists and intellectuals outside Iraq, considered the political model that Qasim sought to implement an exemplary one. Did not Iraq benefit from a leader who was modest, not corrupt, abhorred violence, was tolerant of difference, and was dedicated to improving the lives of ordinary citizens? This argument has great merit. However, it failed to recognize that Qasim's was a dictator. One of the key concerns of this paper is to examine the tension between social justice, on the one hand, and political freedoms, particularly individual rights, on the other. In less developed countries, where large segments of the populace do not enjoy basic standards

Perhaps no other issue is as controversial when evaluating the July 14, 1958 Revolution in Iraq as the legacy of its leader, Staff Brigadier ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. Fifty years after his death, Qasim remains an enigma. Loved by the poor, reviled by Pan-Arabists
of living, is it true that democracy and individual freedoms need to be subordinated to promoting the material well being of society? Or is it possible to reconcile these two political perspectives and create what we may call “social democracy”?

I will argue that one of the great fallacies of the period of military rule during the late 1940s and 1950s, and after, was the argument that the overthrow of the ancien regime, whether civilian rule in Syria, or monarchical rule in Egypt and Iraq, represented a form of progress. Military regimes argued that representative democracy could wait, and that it would be established once these regimes had imposed order, eliminated foreign influence and brought about economic development, especially through nationalization of domestic and foreign enterprise and land reform. No matter how benign and socially conscious military rule, including that of the Qasim regime, it set the stage for authoritarianism, widespread corruption through control of the state public sectors that were established after foreign and domestic enterprise was nationalized, and, in many instances, especially under Ba’thist regimes in Syria and Iraq, led to massive human rights abuses. In terms of Qasim’s rule, it can be argued that his regime set the stage for the brutal Ba’thist regimes that succeeded him by laying the cornerstones of corporatist rule that led to the degradation of Arab politics in Iraq and much of the Arab world.

The present examination of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim is not conceived as the study of a “great man in history.” Rather, I am more concerned with the political symbolism and myths surrounding his leadership of the July 14th Revolution, the substantive impact of his policies on Iraqi society, and the implications of his rule for democratic theory in the Arab world. My concerns are also to use Qasim’s rule to examine the development of a set of political dynamics in Iraq and the Arab world during the 1950s that were both positive and negative for the development of civil society and democracy. While there is much to admire about Qasim and the positive impact that he had on Iraqi society, he was, at the end of the day, a dictator, however benign. Perhaps more important, he introduced a form of political rule into Iraq that I call corporatism.

While there is much to admire about Qasim and the positive impact that he had on Iraqi society, he was, at the end of the day, a dictator, however benign. Perhaps more important, he introduced a form of political rule into Iraq that I call corporatism.
From a social justice perspective, the Qasim’s regime was highly beneficial for Iraq. Qasim implemented many social reforms and promoted a political environment of tolerance for ethnic and religious diversity largely developed as a result of the economic decline that beset the Arab world during the inter-war period, resulting in the collapse of the agrarian sector which forced large numbers of peasants to migrate to urban areas in hope of a better life.\(^7\) In Iraq, this process was particularly pronounced in the south of the country where large numbers of (primarily Shi’i) peasants, known in Iraqi colloquial Arabic as “Shurugi/pl. Shargawiya” (a corruption of sharqi), arrived in Baghdad in large numbers during the 1940s and 1950s. The social disorder that began to increase during the 1920s produced a wide variety of political movements, most of which were concerned with eliminating colonial rule. In Iraq, organizations like the Ahali Group, the National Party, and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) did not devote significant attention to what we can call the “politics of rights.”

The military regimes that seized power during the late 1940s and 1950s in the name of nationalism and anti-colonialism, only to suppress the very movements in whose interests they claimed to rule, claimed that they would restore order. The
corporatism promoted by military regimes had an immediately visible and negative impact in the suppression of liberal rights, such as the muzzling of the press and the outlawing of political parties and movements. Envisioning the nation-state in organic terms, all dissent was viewed as highly destructive of the integrity of the body politic and hence in need of being suppressed. Stressing the idea of a collective Arab mind, and arguing that concepts such as the acquisition of large amounts of wealth, or promoting the idea of class conflict, undermined the inherent unity of the Arab people, Arab corporatism offered no political and social space for social and political difference.

Military regimes took these measures in the name of protecting the nation (al-watan) from the threats posed by Western neo-colonialism and domestic fifth column elements. Corporatism was usually deployed against the right, particularly the supporters of the ancien regimes, i.e., large landowners, merchants and nascent industrialists. It was also used against the left, particularly communists. Examples include Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir’s hanging of Egyptian labor dissidents at the Misr Belda Dyers industrial complex in Kafr al-Dawar shortly after seizing power in 1952, and Saddam Husayn’s execution of communist ministers in 1978 who had been part of the National Front between the Ba’th Party and the ICP established in 1973. Qasim himself, after relying upon the ICP during the first year of his rule, turned on the left in July 1959. Members of the party were jailed and Qasim tried in 1959 to establish a new party under Da’ud Sayigh that would challenge the traditional ICP. In the name of protecting the people, Arab corporatism set the stage for a lengthy period of authoritarianism that entailed one party rule, the suppression of individual rights, human rights abuses, and a degradation of political discourse.

Qasim’s positive image stems from the benign nature of his leadership. He was known for his anti-sectarianism and for appointing members of government based on their qualifications, not their ethnic or confessional background. Qasim’s popularity stemmed in large measure.

Qasim was truly a secular ruler and continued the model of separating religion and state that had characterized the monarchy. The difference between Qasim’s regime and the monarchy was that the Hashimites discriminated against the Shica which was not Qasim’s policy.
from the perception of Iraqis that he was not sectarian and that he cared for the poor. His efforts to enact land reform, and to gain control over Iraq’s oil industry, as well as his building “Revolution City” (madinat al-thawra) in northeast Baghdad that built 10,000 units of public housing for the “Shargawiya” - the immigrants from the south - established a legacy as the only leader in modern Iraqi history who was concerned with the welfare of the people.

Qasim’s commitment to his people’s welfare was born out after his execution by the Ba’thist regime that seized power on February 9, 1963. Although the new regime tried to find any possible evidence of corruption by Qasim, they were unable to do so. In fact, it was discovered that Qasim, who received 3 state salaries - as a retired army officer, Prime Minister and Minister of Defense - had donated all of his money to the poor. Further, he owned no clothes except his army uniforms. His living accommodations were a small apartment and his office in the Ministry of Defense where he often slept in order to keep up with his government duties. This information, which became public knowledge, only added to Qasim’s aura in many circles in Iraq.

At the same time, Qasim was vilified by the new Ba’thist regime and subsequent republican regimes, all of which were Arab nationalist in political orientation. According to Arab nationalists, Qasim’s most egregious sin was to refuse to allow Iraq join the United Arab Republic. That he did not engage in “immediate unity” (al-wahda al-fawriya) with the United Arab Republic led to his being characterized as a traitor. After his overthrow and execution, he was further stigmatized characterized as “Aduw al-Karim,” and was said to have been involved in behavior that was anti-Muslim.

In the name of protecting the people, Arab corporatism set the stage for a lengthy period of authoritarianism that entailed one party rule, the suppression of individual rights, human rights abuses, and a degradation of political discourse (9) The Iraqi leader also carried the stigma of being called a “shu’ubi.”

Qasim was truly a secular ruler and continued the model of separating religion and state that had characterized the monarchy. The difference between Qasim’s regime and the monarchy was that the Hashimites discriminated against the Shi’a which was not Qasim’s policy. There was no doubt that he
himself was religious and that he respected religious leaders, both Sunni and Shi’i. However, Qasim was adamantly opposed to having the clergy guide public policy in Iraq. Thus, he did not accept the religious hierarchy’s views on the status of women in Iraqi society which became a major point of contention between his regime and the Shi’i clergy and the Hawza. Many clerics were incensed by the rights given to women in the Personal Status Law that the Qasim regime passed in 1959, the most progressive in the Arab world.

The multiple faces of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim

What do the contentious debates that surrounded Qasim’s rule tell us about identity politics in Iraqi society? It is instructive to examine the narratives that have developed surrounding ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim’s leadership of the July Revolution. Each of the narratives offers a different perspective, not only in its assessment of his leadership role, but how he was viewed by different sectors of society. These narratives demonstrate the political struggles that were extant at the time of the Revolution and can be compared to those that continue to this day.

The Arab nationalist narrative reflects, historically, a powerful tendency in Iraq politics, not only because it possessed great currency in the Arab world during the 1950s, but because it was supported by the most powerfulinstitution of the time, the Iraqi army. For Arab nationalists, the 1958 Revolution represented an important step forward in bringing about Arab unity which would in turn reestablish the political strength that the Arabs had exercised during the Arab-Islamic empires of the 7th through 12th centuries, particularly the Abbasid Empire. In their assessment, the Arabs’ decline had not been their fault, but rather was the result of external conspiracies that had begun during the very nadir of Arab power and glory. The most prominent of these conspiracies was that of the so-called shu’ubis, purportedly a conspiracy sustained by the Persian bureaucrats who had been retained by the Arabs after their conquest of Mesopotamia in 637 CE. Arab according to language and external demeanor, but secretly still harboring loyalties to neighboring Persia, the shu’ubis
were the real cause of the Abbasid Empire's collapse in 1258 CE. In the Pan-Arabist narrative, Iraqis of Persian heritage worked tirelessly to undermine the Abbasid Empire. Indeed, one of the narratives promoted by some Sunni Arab Iraqis today is built on the ancient notion of the al-shu'ubiyat movement, despite the fact that scholarly inquiry has shown it to be without historical merit.\(^{(10)}\) Thus the collapse of Saddam Husayn's regime in 2003 is part of a conspiracy in which the Persians seek to once again try and conquer Iraq.

A core component of the world view of many Pan-Arabists in Iraq and elsewhere has been to view Arab society and politics through the lens of conspiracies and lost opportunities. In the modern period, the colonial powers' ability to achieve their political and economic goals in the Arab world was assisted by disloyal citizens, particularly minorities, and those, such as the Shi'a, who are not authentic (asil) Arabs. If these conspiracies were removed, Pan-Arabists argue that the Arab world would experience unity and a renaissance (al-nahda).

In Iraq, Pan-Arab nationalism acquired strong sectarian overtones after the July Revolution. However, this was not true when the Ba'ath Party was founded in Iraq in 1952. The initial leadership of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party under Fu'ad al-Rikabi, from 1952 to 1961, was Shi'i. Other Shi'is, such as the prominent politician and government minister, Fadil al-Jamali, were ardent Arab nationalists (although al-Jamali was a liberal and supporter of the Hashmite monarchy). However, most Iraqis who supported Pan-Arab nationalism were from Sunni Arab origins, particularly tribal regions in the so-called Sunni Arab triangle. Representing a minority, Sunni Arabs hoped that, were they able to become part of a Pan-Arab state, they would then become the majority. In their construction of Arabism, Pan-Arabists developed what I call a "politics of victimization." They viewed the Sunni Arab community in Iraq as under constant threat from the time of the original Arab conquest of Mesopotamia in 637 CE. This perspective was reflective a general tendency towards authoritarian rule. Because democracy created the possibility of new groups that sought to undermine Arab unity in Iraqi society joining...

\(\text{The Iraqi narrative is certainly the most favorable towards cAbd al-Karim Qasim.} \)

Qasim's anti-sectarianism and emphasis on social justice and national unity resonated strongly with Iraqi nationalist...
the political process, democracy in its liberal form needed to be suppressed to protect the common good.

Pan-Arabism, I would argue, also played an important social psychological role among Sunni Arabs. It created a sense of superiority among its supporters, many of whom were army officers of marginal social status, who reacted to the rising nationalist movement in Iraq that challenged the prerogatives of the Sunni Arab elite that had ruled Iraq under the Ottomans and saw its power declining once Iraq became an independent state in 1921.

Behind the ideology of Pan-Arabism lay a sectarian politics in which rural and tribal Sunni Arabs, and some urban Sunni Arabs, especially in ethnically mixed and contested cities such as Mosul, sought to retain control over the state that was for many of them the employer of last resort. In other words, Pan-Arabism reflected an undertone of social class conflict reflected through struggle for and control over the state by a stratum of society that possessed limited economic options.

When victory was snatched from them by what they considered Qasim’s betrayal in not joining the United Arab Republic, Pan-Arabists within the Iraqi army were extremely bitter. Qasim’s actions fitted perfectly the notion of victimization, continuing the betrayal of the Hashimite monarchy in allowing the British to suppress the Pan-Arabist May 1941 uprising. Now Qasim was seen as the agent of communism and Soviet influence in Iraq and Arab world. The use of the term “shu’ubi” against Qasim was indicative both of his mixed confessional background (of Sunni and Shi’i parentage and Kurdish heritage as well) and his treasonous behavior in thwarting the “will” of the Arab nation.

The Iraqiist narrative is certainly the most favorable towards ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. Qasim’s anti-sectarianism and emphasis on social justice and national unity resonated strongly with Iraqiist nationalists. While recognizing Iraq’s Arab character, Iraqiist nationalism valorized Iraq’s status as a multi-ethnic society. The ICP has always been at the core of Iraqiist nationalism. The historical attraction of the party which was founded in 1934, and brought together a variety of Marxist tendencies that began

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in the 1920s, has less to do with its socialist ideology than with the party’s emphasis on social justice and anti-sectarianism, where the individual’s ethnic, confessional or social class background has no bearing on membership.

But Qasim’s appeal also extended to the Shi’i masses who saw him as a patron or paramount shaykh (shaykh al-mashayikh) who cared for their welfare. Building Revolution City (Madinat al-Thawra) created a special affection for him among poor Shi’a who found at least some refuge in the state public housing. Qasim’s support for education and artistic expression created strong sympathies for him among the intelligentsia.\(^{(11)}\) His speeches commemorating Iraqi literary figures, support for the higher education system, visits to literary associations such as the Union of Iraqi Writers, and the appointment of prominent intellectuals to important government posts, such as Dr. Faysal al-Samir to post of Minister of Guidance, all contributed to winning Qasim strong support among writers, academics, artists and professionals.

The Islamist narrative of the Qasim regime traced its origins to the increased attraction that development of a split among the Shi’i clergy between those who retained their commitment to the educational-spiritual or “quietist” tradition in Iraqi Shiism, and those clerics who sought to become more actively involved in social and political life. The most prominent cleric in this latter trend was Ayatallah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. To activist Shi’i clerics, the July 1958 Revolution represented an increased threat to the authority of the al-majja’iyyat through the social reforms enacted by Qasim. Particularly disturbing to the clerics was the 1959 Personal Status Law that gave women more rights than they possessed in any other Arab state. The law prevented women under the age of 15 from being forced into marriages and gave them equal inheritance rights with men. Despite extensive religious symbolism and references to Islam in his many speeches, Qasim was for many Shi’i clerics the embodiment of secular rule that threatened

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Pan-Arabism no longer resonates with any significant portion of the Iraqi populace, especially after the failure of Saddam Husayn’s regime and inability of the Ba’thist funded insurgency to force an American withdrawal from Iraq.

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Eric Davis: ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim

the ICP increasing held for Shi’i youth after its founding in 1934. The 1958 Revolution was seen as accelerating the attraction of the left for young Shi’is. The emergence of an Islamist trend in Iraqi politics reflected the
to undermine their traditional authority. The more the Shi’i masses identified with Qasim, the more alarmed the clergy became.

The founding of the Islamic Call Party (Hizb al-Da’wa al-Islamiya), during the late 1950s, reflected an effort to offset the apolitical orientation of large numbers of Shi’i mujtahids who populated the ranks of the Hawza, the loose association of religious institutions of learning in and around the shrine city of al-Najaf. While much of the development of the Da’wa Party is still shrouded in mystery, the efforts of prominent clerics, particularly Ayatallah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and later his brother, Ayatallah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, to develop a form of Shiism that spoke to the needs of the masses was clear. Baqir al-Sadr’s writings, especially his two main works, Iqtisaduna (Our Economy), and Falsafatuha (Our Philosophy), were specifically directed at countering Marxist ideology by arguing that Iraq’s Shi’a did not need to turn to Marxism, but could find all their needs addressed within Sadr’s formulations.

A final narrative of Qasim’s rule was not very prominent at the time of the Revolution, but has become more prominent following the fall of Saddam Husayn and the Ba’th in 2003. This narrative does not look very favorable upon Qasim who is viewed as a dictator that destroyed Iraq’s democratic infrastructure by banning political parties, refusing to allow elections, and curtailing personal freedoms, e.g., placing constraints on the press and freedom of expression. This narrative formed a silent discourse among much of the liberal intelligentsia and the upper middle and upper classes after the Revolution.\(^{(13)}\)

With the human rights abuses of Saddam Husayn’s regime, especially in the aftermath of the repression of the February-March Intifada, and under the UN sanctions regime of the 1990s, more and more Iraqi intellectuals and opposition figures began to explore questions of human rights and freedoms, and to question whether the July 1958 Revolution and the republican regimes that came to power in its wake really brought social and political progress to Iraq. Qasim’s regime was largely excluded from this analysis. However, the critiques raised against the brutal violence of the first Ba’thist regime, headed by Ali Salih al-Sa’di, that came to power in February, 1963, the sectarianism of Colonel ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, who became Iraqi president when the army removed al-Sa’di in November 1963, and massive human rights abuses of the second Ba’thist regime under Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn that seized power in 1963, carried implications for the Qasim regime.
If we examine each of these political discourses, we find that they have gone through significant transformations since the July 1958 Revolution. Pan-Arabism no longer resonates with any significant portion of the Iraqi populace, especially after the failure of Saddam Husayn’s regime and inability of the Ba’thist funded insurgency to force an American withdrawal from Iraq and its collapse after the organization of the Awakening Movement in 2006 and 2007 in al-Anbar province. The Islamist movement has also been transformed as well as the Islamic Call Party has become a supporter of parliamentary democracy, controls the Iraqi government in the person of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and no longer retains close ties to the Sadr family. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Sadrist Trend, the other main Islamist parties, are more interested in augmenting their political power within the structures of the state and securing their economic interests, particularly control over oil smuggling, and oil resources in the southern part of Iraq, than involving themselves in the types of ideological debates that dominated political discourse during the Qasim era. Of course, the ICP, despite having a cabinet post and advising the al-Maliki government, is but a shell of what it was during the 1950s and early 1960s.

After the Ba’th Party tried to assassinate Qasim in December 1959, he came to believe that God had saved him from death so that he could continue to lead the Iraqi nation. Ultimately, a cult of personality developed around Qasim which did not permit any criticisms of his policies.

The Iraqi model has been gaining strength in direct proportion to the increase in venality of sectarian political parties, The Iraqi model has been gaining strength in direct proportion to the decline in influence of sectarian parties, such as the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, and the overall decline in violence in Iraq. Complaints over lack of public services such as electricity, education, access to health care, police protection and trash removal, have emerged as the key concerns of the Iraqi populace now that they have been able to largely free themselves from dependence on sectarian militias and insurgent groups because the state has been able to regain control of areas formerly dominated by radical organizations. Among Iraqis, ideology has largely subsumed to more pragmatic concerns, such as access to
employment and critical government services, including housing, health, and education.

Qasim and political parties

A speech that Qasim gave to the main front organization of the ICP, the Ansar al-Islam or Peace Partisans, in April of 1959 spelled out his views on political parties:

I have let it be known that I am above political orientations (almuyul), above political tendencies, and above parties. I am against parties because I stand behind the entire society, and work to serve all of it. Were I to join a group or party, I would become part of a minority. As such, I would be serving minority interests, not the majority of society. I always strive to serve all the people, whereas whatever political party we might consider, would have a membership of a million and a half people at most, which is still a minority compared to society as a whole. Thus I strive for a higher ideal that is called “above parties” and above “political tendencies”...I stand with all political parties and perspectives as long as the guiding principle is to serve the nation, freedom, and the cause of peace. I don’t differentiate between religion, gender, language, or nationality (qawm). I am with everyone as we walk hand in hand to insure freedom and peace.\(^{(16)}\)

At many levels, Qasim’s anti-party stance possessed a powerful rationale. Iraq had been characterized by considerable political strife under the monarchy. For Qasim, avoiding identification with any particular political party made sense in light of the attacks on him for not joining the United Arab Republic and the accusation that he had given in to ICP pressure not to pursue an Arab unity political agenda.

However, Qasim was very clearly criticizing the concept of political parties and, by extension, political participation of the citizenry and their rights to organize themselves. In making this argument, Qasim differed little from Pan-Arabists such as Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and Michel ‘Aflaq who argued that political parties contributed to societal fragmentation and political discord. Qasim’s assertion that he was above political parties and politics promoted a simplistic and naive idea that somehow political leaders could shield themselves from ideological orientations and concerns. Most dangerous in this formulation was the implicit
argument that involving oneself in politics, particularly political parties and organizations, was somehow a socially destructive exercise that only served the immediate and parochial interest of the members and their leaders. This formulation served to demobilize the public by casting aspirations on political participation and civic involvement. Better to let the leader (al-za'im), who stood above politics, to control the nation's political processes because he understood the will of the nation better than everyone else, not being tied to a narrow political agenda of any one political party.

Secular and Islamist corporatism

It is interesting to note the parallels between corporatist nationalism under military regimes and those of Islamists who likewise thought in corporatist terms. In his memoirs, Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Society of the Muslim Brothers, argued vigorously for anti-partyism (al-ahizbiya). For al-Banna, the word of God was eternal and never changing. Therefore, it could not be subject to human evaluation through being subject to a vote at the ballot box. Qasim likewise advocated “anti-partyism.” Rather than arguing that Islam was above politics, Qasim instead argued that the will of the people was clear to all and could not be subordinated to party politics. Here we see the pernicious outcome of the monolithic, unidimensional and highly abstract thinking that gradually undermined respect for party politics and political participation, and the ability of citizens to comprehend the manner in which politics might help them improve their lives.

Evaluating Qasim’s legacy

In December 2003, the Interim Governing Council, the first explicitly sectarian government formed in modern Iraq, tried to pass a law curtailing women’s rights. With the help of women’s organizations, the ICP, and an already extensive blogosphere, large numbers of Iraqis mobilized demonstrations in the streets of Baghdad and elsewhere. Through these actions, the new personal status law was withdrawn from consideration by the IGC and women’s rights were preserved (at least for the moment). In this struggle, ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim loomed large because it was his personal status law that women’s organizations and political parties and groups were defending. This law stands as one of his most important legacies and remains a model for other Arab countries.

Against this specific aspect of his very positive legacy, we must also juxtapose the restrictions that Qasim began to place on
labor unions that had reached over 200 in number by the summer of 1959 and that were closely related to and supportive of the ICP. When, in Qasim’s view, the ICP had become too powerful by the summer of 1959, he turned on the party and restricted its power. Labor unions also felt the repressive hand of the regime as Qasim appointed government officials to leadership roles within them. While the monarchy had repressed many strikes, especially those organized by oil workers, stevedores in the port city of Basra, and state railway workers, often violently, never had any pre-1958 government sought to take over the leadership of unions. By placing government bureaucrats in positions of authority in labor unions, Qasim undermined civil society in Iraq, and the long and hard efforts that had gone into years of organizing labor unions. His actions sent messages to Iraqis that they should be careful not to challenge the political authority of the state or to establish organizations that it viewed as threatening.

Closely allied to Qasim’s efforts to restrict political parties and participation was his conceptualization of himself not just as standing above politics, but as Iraq’s “Sole Leader” (al-za’im al-Awhad). After the Ba’th Party tried to assassinate Qasim in December 1959, he came to believe that God had saved him from death so that he could continue to lead the Iraqi nation. Ultimately, a cult of personality developed around Qasim which did not permit any criticisms of his policies.

The lack of constraints on political leadership during the Qasim era manifested itself in yet another problematic and dangerous way. The establishment of a new and parallel system of courts known as the “Revolution Court” (Mahkamat al-Thawra) had serious negative consequences for Iraqi society. Created to try the “enemies of the Revolution,” judges were appointed based on political loyalties rather than legal qualifications, including the most notorious judge, Qasim’s cousin, Colonel Fadil al-Mahdawi. What came to be known as the Mahdawi Court often assumed a circus like atmosphere where Mahdawi, the chief judge, interrupted the trial proceedings to deliver his own folk poetry before the court and insult the defendant. Although this court was relatively benign in the sentences it handed out, it undermined respect for the law among the Iraqi populace, and diminished respect for Qasim and his regime. This illegitimate legal structure set a precedent for future regimes. It was perfected in a much more repressive manner under Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn who used it as a legal veneer to liquidate all actual and perceived political opposition.

When ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim decided not
Eric Davis: 'Abd al-Karim Qasim

‘Abd al-Karim Qasim was one of the most influential political figures in the history of modern Iraq. Despite having ruled Iraq only five years between 1958 and 1963, he left an indelible mark on the Iraqi psyche to individual rights with strong support for social justice (he considered himself in the tradition of British Fabian socialism), was correct in the stance that he took. Although he continued to strive for liberal freedoms and social justice until his death in 1968, Kamil Chadirji’s positions is one that democracy activists in the Arab world can look to as a model which they should emulate.(18)

Conclusion

‘Abd al-Karim Qasim was one of the most influential political figures in the history of modern Iraq. Despite having ruled Iraq for only five years between 1958 and 1963, he left an indelible mark on the Iraqi psyche. In assessing his legacy, it is necessary to avoid the temptation of falling into one of two traps. While Pan-Arabists excoriated Qasim for his failure to pursue Pan-Arab unity by joining the United Arab Republic in 1958, the Iraqist nationalists extolled his commitment to the poor and downtrodden, his personal probity, and his efforts to reduce foreign control over Iraq’s oil industry and its larger economy. However, neither of these two assessments of
Qasim’s regime address his negative impact on political participation through his imposition of a corporatist form of political and social organization on Iraq, a corporatism which privileged group rights over individual rights. In Qasim’s model of politics, there was little space for the individual or the rule of law.

At the end of the day, we should all remember that ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim was a dedicated public servant who cared about the Iraqi people before all else. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, Qasim deprived Iraqis of their political freedom by imposing dictatorial rule on Iraq. In the end, he alone was responsible for making all decisions. In organizing politics along authoritarian lines, Qasim inadvertently paved the way for a much more repressive and destructive dictatorship after 1968 under Saddam Husayn and the Arab Socialist Ba’th Party.

Qasim’s rule underscores the tension between a state which emphasizes social justice and the individual’s submission to the collectivity, on the one hand, as opposed to a state which emphasizes the need for individual rights and the rule of law, on the other. In our haste to justifiably commend Qasim for his honesty, anti-sectarianism and commitment to social justice, we should not lose sight of his destructive legacy as well. While the Hashimite monarchy did not address the social and economic needs of its subjects, it did at least allow a modicum of political, press and artistic freedom. Ultimately, it is not Qasim the person which is the central concern, but rather seeing Qasim as a metaphor for the struggle in Iraq and elsewhere to create a democratic polity which integrates social justice with a concept of citizenship which enshrines the freedom of the individual. Iraq will best be served if it can create a democracy which combines the elements of liberalism and civil society, however flawed, that existed under the Hashimite monarchy, with the elements of social justice and anti-sectarianism that characterized the Qasim regime.
Eric Davis: ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim

Notes

1 Dr. Davis is a Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University and past director of the University’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies. His research has included the study of the relationship between state power and historical memory in modern Iraq, the political economy of Egyptian industrialization, the ideology and social bases of religious radical movements in Egypt and Israel. Dr. Davis has been appointed a fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University; the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin; the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University; the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contempory Culture, Rutgers University; and the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. His publications include Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq (California, 2005); Challenging Colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian Industrialization, 1920-1941 (Princeton, 1983). He is currently finishing a book on Post-Ba’thist Iraq, Taking Democracy Seriously in Iraq, which is under contract with Cambridge University Press. Dr. Davis was appointed a Carnegie Scholar of the Carnegie Corporation of New York for 2007-2008.

2 The desire of the CUP to create a modern state in Turkey that incorporated republicanism and constitutionalism, also include an effort to “Turkify” the Ottoman Empire. This represented a radical break with the past when Islam provided the social and political cement that held the empire together. The “Turkification” policies of the Committee on Union and Progress (CUP) forced Arab and Kurdish Iraqis to confront questions of their place as subjects of the Ottoman Empire in which Islam had heretofore been the social cement that held it together; see Eric Davis, Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005, 32,33-35.

3 For a discussion of Iraqist and Pan-Arabist wings of the Iraqi nationalist movement, see Memories of State, 1315-.

4 The formulation of Qasim’s political programme and policies can be found in the numerous speeches and interviews that he gave between 1958 and 1963. See, for example, Majid Shubayyir, Khutab al-Za’im ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim: 19581959- [The Speeches of the Leader ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim: 19581959-]. London: Alwarrak Books, 2007. See also, Mabadi Thawrat 14 Tammuz: fi Khutab ibn al-Shaeb al-Barr al-Za’im al-Amin ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim Ra’ils al-Wuzara’ wa-l-Qacid al-‘Amm lil-Quwat al-Musallahah [The Principles of the July 14 Revolution in the Speeches
of the Son of the Devoted People, the Trustworthy Leader, ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, Prime Minister and Commander-n-Chief of the Armed Forces], Baghdad: n.p., 1962.

5 I do not mean to denigrate this approach to the study of history. Alan Bullock’s Hitler: A Study in Tyranny, and Erik Erikson’s Young Man Luther, and Gandhi’s Truth, are examples of the insights into historical dynamics that can be derived from this approach.

6 For an excellent analysis of the state of democratic theory in the Arab world, see Illya Harik (Hariq), al-Dimuqratiya wa-Tahaddiyat al-Hadatha bayna al-Sharq wa-al-Gharb [Democracy and the Challenges of Modernization between the East and West], Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2001

7 Of course, a much broader analysis would also emphasize the destructive impact of colonial rule on the Arab world that only exacerbated its economic decline. British rule in Mandate Palestine and Iraq are only two examples of this negative impact.


9 The use of the word inhiraf to describe his behavior had strong negative overtones.


11 Qasim oversaw the creation of what is arguably Iraq’s most famous monument, the Freedom Monument (Nasab al-Hurriya) that was completed by the famous Iraqi artist and sculptor, Jawad Salim (19191961).-


14 ‘Ammar al-Hakim, the son and heir apparent of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, is compared to Saddam’s oldest son and known as the “religious ‘Uday,” due to his authoritarian tendencies, his corruption, especially in the pilgrim trade in al-Najaf and Karbala’, and his purported pursuit of women.

15 Shubbayar, Khutub al-Za‘im, 128129-.


17 Female parliamentarians argue that male members of parliament fight over every policy issue. However, when it comes to curtailing women’s rights, they all come together as one.