

## **The Nexus of Identity and Stability under Consensus Democracy “The Case of Iraq”**

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### **Abstract**

The relationship between Identity and stability occupies the core of consensus democracy philosophy, as this governance model is designed to ultimately realise stability by addressing societal fragmentation in divided societies. In Iraq, this relationship shapes a complicated trajectory, mainly because the society moved fast from identity politics (transition) to issues politics (post-transition), which turned the consensus democracy itself that succeeded in realising stability in the transition by functioning well in addressing identity-related crises paradoxically into a driver for instability in the post-transition, for its dysfunctionality beyond the identity sphere. This article argues that this dysfunctionality is primarily linked to flaws of Arend Lijphart’s theory of consensus democracy more than problems stemming from the Iraqi context. It reviews and analyses the existing literature on the nexus of identity and stability under consensus democracy, taking Iraq as a case study. As a review article, this research uses the qualitative method; its data are collected from secondary sources. It found that the philosophy of consensus democracy is designed to primarily meet transition demands, which makes rapid societal transformation beyond transition raise bottom-up pressures expressed in new demands that this democracy cannot accommodate, creating a growing gap between the post-transitional social dynamics and the transitional politics, which generates chronic instability. Further research is needed on stabilisation mechanisms in post-transition, as most studies of consensus democracy focus on stability in transition.

**Keywords:** Consensus, Dysfunctionality, Identity, Stability, Transition.

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## **1. Introduction**

Identity and stability occupy the core of the consensus democracy philosophy, as this philosophy is designed ultimately to counteract societal segmental fragmentation -expressed by identities- to produce stability, mainly by involving each communal group<sup>1</sup> in the government to safeguard its identity, incentivising it to abandon violence, leading to stability.

In Iraq, consensus democracy was embraced following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, politicising the ethno-sectarian makeup of the Iraqi society for the first time in Iraq's history. The Iraqi society is made up of Arabs (Shiites and Sunnis) and Kurds, besides numerous ethnic, religious, and sectarian minorities<sup>2</sup>. Although the Shiites constitute the majority of the population, the governments of modern Iraq, both during the monarchical (1921-1958) and republican (1958-2003) eras, were dominated by the Sunnis, marginalising the Shiites and Kurds; this trend of marginalisation peaked during the Baathist era (1968-2003) (Haghi and Others,2022; Rastgoo and Others,2018; Dodge and Mansour,2020). Hence, the post-2003 political system unleashed politically long-repressed ethno-sectarian dynamics. The Shiites acquired a dominant position; the Kurds enjoyed an unprecedented position. In contrast, the Sunnis, who had a leading role before 2003, were unhappy with the new dynamics, leading them to boycott the new political system during the early years after 2003.

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1. 'Ethnicity' is over-used as a term referring to all politically salient segmental cleavages in divided societies. Such use imprecisely encapsulates other cleavages such as language, religion, sect, etc. Moreover, for precision and clarity, besides the fact that the Iraqi society is not deeply divided, primarily due to its mixed line of cleavages: ethno-sectarian formula, we will use the term 'communal group' instead of the ethnic group since the former refers to the broader segmental cleavages.

2. Religiously, most estimates suggest that approximately 97 per cent of the population in Iraq follows Islam. The remaining 3% comprises Christians (including Chaldo-Assyrians and Armenians), Yazidis, Mandaeans, Shabaks, and Baha'i. Ethnically, the three largest ethnic groups are Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen. The Arabs constitute 77 per cent of the Iraqi population. Among Iraqi Arabs, approximately 75 per cent are Shiite Muslims, making up 55 to 60 per cent of the entire Iraqi population. Notably, while predominantly composed of Arabs, the Shiite also incorporates Turkmen and Faili-Kurds. On the other hand, approximately 25 per cent of the Iraqi Arab population adheres to Sunni Islam, constituting around 20 per cent of Iraq's total population. The Kurds, as the second-largest ethnic group, constitute around 17 per cent of Iraq's population and are predominantly Sunni. See: Abulatif,2015, p.5; US State Department,2022; Saouli, 2019, pp. 70-71; Pirsoul, 2019, p. 50; Baizidi,2024.

**Table (1): Rating Communal Group's Ratio in the First Iraqi Government after Ratifying the 2005 Constitution**

Communal Group	The Shiites	The Sunnis	The Kurds	The Christians
Number of Posts	20	9	9	1

(Source: Mansour,2019; Stewart-Jolley,2021; Alshamary,2024)

Overall, consensus democracy has delivered almost contradictory outcomes: it initiated democracy in Iraq, ensured identity safety, and preserved the territorial integrity of Iraq, mainly by inducing the Sunnis to join the government, ending the civil war (2005-2007) and undermining the incentives of the Kurds to secede from Iraq; besides, defeating terrorism. On the other hand, it has been the main reason behind the dysfunctional performance of the political system, which led later -especially with the rise of new generations that pay less attention to identity politics, to various existential crises ranging from political instability and rampant corruption to dangerously frequent, mass protests that have destabilised the country. This dynamic has overtime undermined the legitimacy of the Iraqi political system by eroding its ethno-sectarian foundations and adding a new variable: issues-based politics as opposed to traditional identity-based politics.

The Iraqi consensus democracy has fallen into what we call the 'paradox of consensus democracy theory'-mainly occurs in developing countries with mostly religious segmental cleavages, such as Iraq- which is driven mainly by its elitist over-emphasis (as opposed to the so-called passivity of society) and static character (mainly institutional rigidity) (Lijphart,1996;1977; 1999). This theoretical composition makes the consensus democracy succeed in achieving relative stability during the transition, especially by addressing the crisis of identity; paradoxically, in the post-transition<sup>1</sup>, they

1.This paper uses post-transition societies instead of post-conflict, as the latter refers mainly to the immediate stability that follows the civil war. Under this stage, the communal groups driven by the memory of war remain mobilised along ethno-sectarian lines, combined with inter-communal fear and mistrust that creates a potential for a renewed conflict, according to Jarstad (2008a). Conversely, post-transition refers to a stage between post-conflict and the realisation of long-term stability or between short and long-term stability. Under this stage, the conflict transforms from inter-communal group conflict into state-society conflict. It does not necessarily take the form of armed conflict, but chronic crises like frequent mass protests are more common. Communal groups at this stage are often no longer monolithic; new crosscutting cleavages appear, diluting traditional ethno-sectarian

turn that democracy itself into an obstacle to realising long-term stability, mainly by failing to keep pace with the rapid societal transformations and the resultant new demands.

The above problem is significant as it causes the state to get stuck in a vicious cycle of instability in the post-transition with no clear exit strategy; scholars of consensus democracy theory have not addressed it sufficiently because they focus mostly on European cases. Besides, the theory was initially derived from successful experiments in advanced countries to be normatively prescribed later for developing countries plagued by conflicts, causing the theory to focus extensively on developing functioning mechanisms to tackle transition crises like identity with little to no focus on ensuring long-term stability in the post-transition.

This problem appeared more evident in Iraq as it witnessed fast societal transformation. The article seeks to answer a central question: what are the root causes behind the current dysfunctionality of consensus democracy that hinders stability in Iraq? We argue that this dysfunctionality is largely linked to faults associated with the broader theory of consensus democracy itself more than problems stemming from the Iraqi political settings. To answer the above question, this article will review and evaluate the existing literature on the nexus of identity and stability under consensus democracy to identify potential gaps and suggest areas for future research. The rationale behind this methodology lies in the limitations of most individual studies, which often focus on specific aspects, providing a partial understanding of a complex puzzle. Thus, by comparing common findings and highlighting deficiencies in previous research, this approach seeks to paint a broader picture of the root causes of the problem.

This article is divided into four sections, using Iraq as a case study and covering the period from 2003 until 2023. The first explains the methodology employed in this article. The second gives a theoretical image of the relationship between Identity and stability. The third examines

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cleavages, which generally cause every group to be represented by various contending political parties instead of one party. So, post-conflict remains largely transitional in contrast to the post-transitional stage, which largely fits the Iraqi context, where communal groups no longer engage in hostility with each other; new generations care more about issues-based politics than identity-based politics, challenging the largely transitional political system symbolised by consensus democracy.

differing thoughts on consensus democracy in Iraq. Finally, the fourth highlights the societal transformation from identity to issues politics in Iraq to explore how such a trajectory shaped stability there.

**Table (2): Chronology of Key Turns in the Post-2003 Iraq**

Year	Events	Notes
2003	Invasion of Iraq by the US-led Coalition.	On March 20, 2003, the war was launched against Iraq, and after three weeks, Saddam's Baathist regime fell.
2003	The US-led Coalition Disbanded the Baath party, the Iraqi Army and all Security Agencies.	
2003	De-Baathification	The campaign of de-Baathification initiated by the US and Iraqi elite, eliminated senior members of Saddam's regime from the new state institutions, firing over 40,000 senior members of the civil service.
2003	Adoption of Consensus Democracy.	The US and the Iraqi elite, who were in exile before 2003, introduced consensus democracy as a system of governance, distributing posts based on each communal group ratio.
2003-2005	The Sunnis Boycotted the new Political System.	Some of the Sunnis resorted to military means to overthrow the political system.
2005	Iraqi Permanent Constitution	The overwhelming majority in both Shiite and Kurdish areas voted for the constitution in a national referendum, while the Sunni areas largely boycotted it.
2005-2007	Civil War	The war broke out between the Shiites and the Sunnis. It ended primarily when the Sunnis engaged in the government and mobilised against Al-Qaeda.
2011	Withdrawal of US Troops from Iraq.	
2014	Rise of ISIS in Iraq after Occupying a third of Iraq's Territory.	This led Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq's prominent Shiite cleric, to issue a fatwa to resist ISIS. So, the Popular Mobilization Forces were established.
2015	Mass Protests	People protested against consensus democracy's dysfunctionality and identity politics.
2017	The Kurds Held a Referendum to Secede from Iraq.	The Iraqi government rejected the referendum and mostly militarily ended the arrangements for secession.
2019	Mass protests	Wide-scale protests lasted more than six months and called for abolishing consensus democracy. The protests were repressed harshly by killing around 800 protesters. Protests forced Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi to resign and hold early elections.
2022	Military Clashes	The failure to agree on a prime minister candidate among the Shiite political parties after the 2021 elections led to military clashes among Shiite factions for the first time since 2003.

## **2. Methodology**

This article reviews the existing literature on the nexus of identity and stability, focusing on Iraq as a case study to provide a comprehensive overview of the current literature and synthesise the findings. It employs the 'explanatory approach' as a research design because it provides good tools for describing and analysing the case under study. As for the research method, the article utilises the qualitative method; since it is a review article, its data are collected from secondary sources. Concerning data analysis, the study uses the 'content analysis' approach to understand the secondary sources (Althabhwawi and Others,2023:121). The study is conducted through a rigorous search of related research; the criteria for including sources are the academic paper, the article's question, research design, key variables, and time frame. The publication date should be between 2010 and 2024, whereas the exclusion criteria involve research irrelevant to power-sharing and not published in English or Arabic. Ultimately, 23 sources were included in this review.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

Before discussing specific topics related to the nexus of identity and stability, it is worthwhile to highlight the consensus democracy theory broadly. The theory was developed primarily by the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart through his works critiquing Gabriel Almond's typology of democratic systems, which had hypothesised that fragmented cultures lead to institutional instability. Lijphart challenged that claim, arguing that Dutch democracy demonstrates that institutions survive even in divided societies. He concluded that the missing variable in Almond's above analysis was the 'elite cooperation' that could counteract societal cleavages and produce stability (Lijphart,1969:207-225). Such a focus on the elite led many scholars to label the theory 'elitist' (McGarry and O'Leary,2009:16-17).

The consensus democracy theory relies on four elements: 'government by a grand coalition', which states that all significant communal groups should participate in the government with almost no room for opposition; 'Mutual veto', which grants minority groups the right to veto decisions that could damage their vital interests; 'proportionality' emphasises that communal groups should be represented proportionately to their numerical weight; 'autonomy' favours granting communal groups rights to run affairs that only

concern them (Lijphart,1977:25-44; McGarry and O'Leary,2007), which reduces contact among them as O'Leary (2005:11) puts it: "Good fences make good neighbours. Relatedly, the theory prefers the closed list-proportional representation whereby party leaders can rank candidates within their electoral lists as they wish instead of leaving it to voters (Lijphart,1969; 1999).

### **3-1.Terminology**

Researchers have not yet agreed on the exact term that should be used to describe the content of consensus democracy. Views in this regard may be divided into three groups: Gerhard Lehmbruch puts it as a 'contractual democracy', which refers primarily to decisions resulting from that democracy based on the contracting mechanism among the elite (Habib, 2019:22). Jurg Schneider, on the other hand, uses the term 'reconciliatory agreement' to refer to the core principle of consensus democracy that brings together all stakeholders to participate in the political process (Iaad,2013: 286), Arend Lijphart (1977), used the term 'consociationalism' initially in almost all his works, which started early in the 1960s until he published his book "Patterns of democracy" in 1999 whereby he switched mostly to the term 'consensus democracy', which he believes is more applicable to societies that are not deeply divided (Lijphart,1999:34-41).

Arguably, we suppose that the above researchers refer almost to the same content of democracy. Still, they have disagreed on using a specific term; this may be attributed to the local context for each researcher; besides that, consensus democracy is still a relatively new form of governance compared to other widely known forms. On the other hand, the reason why Lijphart switched to the term 'consensus democracy' may be attributed to the evolution of consensus democracy itself and the changes it has gone through over decades; thus, when using consociational democracy, Lijphart might have focused on the political and social context equally, while in consensus democracy, he gave the political context the most focus. In other words, the term 'consociationalism' that Lijphart initially used when he prescribed his theory for deeply divided societies may no longer fit the new developments where many countries adopt that form of democracy despite not suffering from deep social divisions.

Furthermore, the term consensus democracy will be used in this article, as it better fits the new developments and our argument that Iraqi society is not deeply divided. This argument is backed up by the analysis of McGarry and

O’Leary (2007:678), who concluded that Iraq is not divided into three parts as clearly as Bosnia, emphasising divisions within each communal group. Also, Iraq’s society is of mixed segmental cleavages: religious and ethnic, which makes it less prone to severe conflict. The distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic cleavages is well reflected in the analysis of Barry (1975: 502-503), which holds that consensus democracy may work in societies with ideological and religious divisions but not ethnically divided, citing that ethnic conflicts are difficult to resolve by the elite in contrast to religious and ideological divisions. Horowitz (2014:16) concurs with this thinking by saying that “...these countries have birth-based divisions that are more firmly embedded than those based on the mutable religious or class affiliations...”

### **3-2.Identity and Stability**

This section will try to answer two questions: can consensus democracy, based on its underpinnings on identity, truly realise stability? If so, is the stability temporary or durable? To answer these questions, the debate will be divided into three schools of thought:

The school of consensus democracy has almost two opposing views regarding the nexus between stability and identity. The first view emphasises that these identities are durable and should be institutionalised to achieve stability. This is reflected in the words of McGarry and O’Leary (1995:338): “Consociationalism also realises that communal or ethnic divisions are resilient rather than rapidly biodegradable and that they must be recognised rather than wished away”. As such, advocates of this school consider themselves realists, saying that in places where communal divisions are long-standing, it is reasonable to accept the assumption that these groups will continue to exist (O’Leary,2005; Lijphart,1977:48; McGarry and O’Leary,2009:17). Pirsoul (2019:57) acknowledges the validity of this reasoning and adds that the feeling of a communal group whose identity is threatened pushes for politicising that identity. Importantly, Lijphart admits that communal identities get entrenched under consensus democracy; he argues that this democracy “makes plural societies more thoroughly plural. Its approach is not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognise them explicitly and to turn these segments into constructive elements of a stable democracy” (Lijphart,1977:42). Hence, Lijphart (1969:216) defines consensus democracy as: “government by elite



cartel designed to turn democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy”.

The second view is represented by a minority of researchers whose empirical works suggest that consensus democracy realises durable stability in divided societies by replacing in the long run communal divisions with cross-cutting cleavages, as in the case of the Netherlands and Austria, where the deep societal cleavages within the Dutch and Austrian societies were replaced with political divisions in the form of left- and right-wing ideologies, which, in turn, transformed consensus democracy there (Dekker and Ester,1996; Bax,1990; Picard,2015). This view is seemingly acknowledged indirectly by Lijphart, who holds that consensus democracy can foster “sufficient mutual trust at both elite and mass levels to render itself superfluous” (Lijphart,1977:228).

The second school contends that consensus democracy fails to fulfil stability; they base their argument on two main foundations: first, consensus democracy entrenches communal divisions and does not resolve conflict; Instead, it freezes the conflict temporarily, keeping the prospect that the conflict may break out at any time. Therefore, consensus democracy does not promote moderation; conversely, it empowers communal leaders, who push for deepening the communal divisions and simultaneously block any attempt to seriously reform the political system that rewards them (Jarstad, 2008b:125; Anderson,2012:70). Secondly, consensus democracy as a governance model was created in Europe based on its countries’ settings, including the nature of identity there, making the prospect of applying it to divided societies in other countries, such as Asia and Africa, unrealistic (Horowitz,1985:571).

The third school distinguishes between short and long-term stability when discussing the feasibility of consensus democracy. They maintain that this democracy could work as a transitional arrangement in the aftermath of civil wars to address the crisis of identity, and they doubt its capacity to produce stability in the long term (Sisk,2013:10; McCulloch,2014:502; Roeder and Rothchild,2005; McCulloch and McEvoy,2020; Alkhudary,2023:15). Interestingly, Sisk (2013:16) tries to balance the two opposing schools of thought by favouring centripetalism<sup>1</sup> over the long term and consensus democracy in the short term.

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1.Centripetalism seeks stability in divided societies by motivating moderation, primarily through the electoral system (AV) that depoliticises communal identities and facilitates the

In reviewing and analysing the above studies, they all seem to recognise the linkage between identity and stability through different perspectives. Yet, several findings may be raised: The analysis advanced mainly by Dekker & Ester, who stated that consensus democracy replaces communal divisions with cross-cutting cleavages in the long run, is sound. Yet, it is critical to distinguish here between ethnic on the one hand and religious and ideological identities on the other, as the ethnic identity, as shown previously, is hard to transform. Also, it seems that the consensus democracy, not on its initiative, replaces communal divisions with cross-cutting ones in a top-down manner. However, it contributes indirectly to this development mainly by securing communal identity, which causes people to no longer worry about their identity and, as such, develop new cross-cutting identities. Hence, the change generally in societies with religious and ideological identities often comes in the form of bottom-up, from the societal level, not from the political level, where, conversely, the elite, who benefit from the consensus democracy, preserve it and block attempts to undermine it, causing chronic crises and instability.

Namely, consensus democracy, often in the post-transition, becomes a victim of the success it made in the transition because addressing identity crisis facilitates the emergence of an era of new demands that- based on its philosophy revolving around identity- is not well-equipped to accommodate, which produces a growing gap between the social and political dynamics expressed by chronic crises. Under such circumstances, consensus democracy turns the inter-communal group conflict into state-society conflict. This conflict challenges the legitimacy of the elite and causes the state to face a vicious cycle of disturbances threatening its survival. Ironically, this paradox often happens in developing countries, creating a relatively stable political system -at least from a conventional perspective- versus a largely unstable society with new generations moving beyond the transition.

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formation of an inter-ethnic coalition of moderates and simultaneously makes it difficult for extremists to be included in that coalition. Thus, the difference between centripetalism and consensus democracy lies in whether the conflict regulation should be designed by building a moderate elite among the majority (centripetalism) or by building moderates among the hardline elite by involving representatives from all significant communal groups. Centripetalism is mainly associated with the works of Horowitz, who presents it as an alternative to consensus democracy (See Horowitz,1985;2014).

Seemingly, the above shift resulting from the changing societal dynamics revolves around people's political behaviour towards the politicisation of communal identities more than the transformation of these identities themselves. In other words, the contradictory outputs of the consensus democracy enable it to produce stability initially and then turn it into a driver for instability due to the failure to deliver good performance mainly because of the corruption that stems from the lack of accountability and the poor or absence of the opposition coincides with the rise of new generations that relatively loosely associated with identities compared to the older ones—cause the saliency of communal identities in shaping politics gets weaker gradually. Yet, these identities remain active in impacting people's behaviour in areas other than politics. An analogy in this context can be made relatively when analysing the decline of religious identities in shaping the political behaviour of most Europeans, mainly due to the negative political legacies of the religious authority. Still, religion shapes their behaviour in public life.

The argument advocated mainly by Sisk and McCulloch that consensus democracy could work as a transitional arrangement, while it doubts its ability to produce long-term stability, sounds logical in broader terms; yet, these studies do not clarify why consensus democracy does not produce long-term stability, how it contributes to instability, or how to fix that problem. Also, although they agreed to a large extent that this democracy should be replaced by centripetalism in the long term, they did not explain how to make such a big switch. More importantly, proponents of consensus democracy have almost not responded yet to this point raised by their critics.

If Jarstad's question on how a war-to-democracy transition can be realised peacefully (Jarstad,2008a:21) might have been answered by Schneckener, who argues that consensus democracy is a better mechanism for achieving peace and democracy, especially in the immediate aftermath of war, as it could easily be reached as a settlement deal by the contending communal groups under almost any circumstances (Schneckener,2000). Then, moving from transition to post-transition under consensus democracy seems more complicated than war-to-democracy or short-term stability, as it relates to long-term stability. Besides, the type of challenges in the transition is relatively more apparent as they revolve mainly around identity, state unity, and security. Conversely, in the post-transition, the core problem revolves

around the widening gap between the elite and the public, transforming this relationship into a perpetual conflict that occurs almost daily. Additionally, the root causes of such a conflict are invisible or not narrow enough to be settled quickly, consequently subjecting the state, characterised by a paralysed political system and a frustrated public, to chronic crises.

More critically, the claim made by Sisk of replacing consensus democracy with centripetalism in the long term looks attractive theoretically; however, it is a bit unrealistic practically, mainly for two reasons: consensus democracy, once applied, tends almost to be entrenched formally and informally, making the prospect of getting rid of it in the short term is quite difficult. This is well illustrated in the Lebanese experiment, where the desire to eliminate the ethno-sectarian arrangements is reflected in the old and new constitutions, which consider them an interim phase (Saouli,2019: 83). Additionally, the switch to centripetalism formally or at the political level instead of being developed gradually in a bottom-up manner could trigger a severe reaction from some communal groups driven by fear over their identity since the stability of divided societies is almost always characterised by chronic fragility, as Horowitz eloquently puts it: “Ethnic politics is a high-stakes game, and there are strong inclinations to stay with what is familiar” (Horowitz,2014:18; Russel and Shehadi,2005:139-147).

Broadly, almost the whole argument for and against consensus democracy revolves around communal identities as a central unit of analysis, missing the broader picture of linking that with the relationship between the elite and society and its impact on stability. Namely, the case of Iraqi consensus democracy has demonstrated that even the liberal form of that democracy<sup>1</sup>, which provides room for the rise of new identities, could not realise stability; this dilemma can be mainly attributed to the broader structure of

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1.A distinction developed by the second generation of consensus democracy scholars between pre-determination and self-determination or corporate and liberal consensus democracy, respectively. The self-determination (corporate) form of consensus democracy indicates that the communal groups should be identified in advance. The logic of this form asserts that communal group identities are fixed, and these groups are homogenous internally and bounded externally. This form also privileges these existing identities over those not politically involved. By contrast, the self-determination (liberal) form of consensus democracy allows any communal identity to rise and insert itself politically through elections, whether they are based on ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups or based on intra-group or inter-group affiliations. For further details, see (McGarry and O’Leary,2007; McCulloch,2014; McCulloch and McEvoy,2019:3).

consensus democracy, mainly the dominant role of the elite in decision-making as opposed to the weak society, which makes the latter ineffective politically irrespective of the identity shifts within it. So, as stated, this dilemma makes the consensus democracy succeed initially in achieving temporary stability and turn it later into a driver for instability when the society moves beyond the transition and pushes for political change that this democracy can accommodate.

#### **4. Perspectives on the Consensus Democracy and Stability in Iraq**

Various perspectives on consensus democracy<sup>1</sup> and stability in Iraq may be grouped into two schools of thought: opponents and proponents of that

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<sup>1</sup> There is a debate on the type of consensus democracy in Iraq. This debate falls into three differing groups: first, this group says the Iraqi constitution includes consensus democracy in its provisions. Thus, Younis (2011:4) argues that the constitution was based on Lijphart's prescription of consensus democracy. The second group claims that the Iraqi consensus democracy includes some of Lijphart's theory's elements, so they term it a semi-consensus democracy. In this context, Abu Latif argues that the consensus democracy in Iraq suffers from the absence of two elements of the consensus democracy theory: grand coalition and mutual veto (Abu Latif,2020). Thirdly, this group goes further to claim that the Iraqi consensus democracy is informal in its entirety. Hence, Dodge (2020:145-152) claims that the Iraqi consensus democracy functions based on informal rules, saying that apart from a limited form of federalism, the Iraqi constitution does not include any of the principal elements of Lijphart's theory. We argue that the above studies relied solely on the criterion of formal settings to conclude that the Iraqi consensus democracy is informal or semi-consensus. This analysis misses a critical point: Lijphart himself introduced the term semi-consensus democracy first to describe the status of democracy in countries like Canada and Israel, which had only one or two elements of his theory within both formal and informal settings; namely, he does not follow only the formal criterion to assess the status of democracy in these countries (Lijphart,1977:124-130), as he believes the informal rules are part of the broader picture of consensus democracy, and this is well illustrated in his analysis of South Africa experiment of consensus democracy (Lijphart,1998:148). Similarly, Switzerland, widely acknowledged as a consensus democracy country, is regarded as a prime model for informal consensus democracy (Schneckener,2000:18). Furthermore, we argue that the Iraqi consensus democracy is semi-formal, as the elements of Lijphart's theory are encompassed in formal and informal settings. Importantly, the informal settings in Iraq are not as weak as they may look; by contrast, they are deeply entrenched in the political trajectory, being developed gradually and respected by successive elites, reflecting the strength of consensus democracy and its ability to shape the political system in its image. This is well reflected in the words of O'Driscoll and Costantini (2023:10-11): "There are strong criticisms that power sharing in Iraq is voluntary...this fails to acknowledge the permanence of this voluntary arrangement...power sharing is voluntary only in name and a government would not be

democracy. The opponents may as well be categorised into three groups: first, this group looks at the broader picture of the consensus democracy in Iraq and links it with instability there. In this context, Younis (2011) and to some extent Qaddour (2022) supposes that the 2005 constitution of Iraq was based on Lijphart's theory; it has contributed to destabilising Iraq. Younis also believes consensus democracy is unsuitable for divided societies, and Iraq is no exception. Relatedly, Dixon (2011) came to the same conclusion by arguing that the consensus democracy had not appropriately managed conflict in Iraq, which resulted in instability. McEvoy and Abulatif (2020) link the failure of consensus democracy in providing stability to the inconsistent relationship between its initial adoptability and subsequent functionality. Differently put, they believe that the weak adoptability of that democracy, exemplified mainly by the exclusion of the Sunnis, led to poor functionality in many aspects, chiefly the dominance of the Shiites over politics and the Kurdish referendum in 2017 to secede from Iraq. McGarry (2019:6) believes that the power-sharing in Iraq has not materialised as intended; as such, it led to a shift from a Sunni Arab minority-controlled regime before 2003 to a Shiite Arab majoritarian dictatorship.

Secondly, this group contends that consensus democracy is unsuitable to the Iraqi context and links this inconsistency to instability. Ibrahim (2013:88) argues that Iraq does not provide a supportive environment for that democracy because it has not met all its elements (grand coalition, mutual vote, autonomy, and proportionality). As a result, the political system in Iraq, according to Ibrahim, is mainly dysfunctional. Haji (2020:73) shares with Ibrahim the view of the unsuitability of consensus democracy for Iraq; he highlights the role of the US in imposing that democracy after invading Iraq in 2003, which resulted in its dysfunctionality. Further, Haji (2020:76) agrees with Ibrahim to some extent by arguing that some elements of consensus democracy in Iraq are still missing, and he outlines some of that democracy's flaws, such as the fragile balance between ethno-sectarian groups and the intra-groups divisions.

Thirdly, this group focuses on problems relating to the theory of consensus democracy and links that to instability. This group falls into two subgroups: one attributes the problems that Iraqi consensus democracy suffers from to Lijphart's theory's flaws, and conversely, the second one focuses on the

lack of some elements of that theory in the Iraqi experiment. Dodge argues that the Iraqi political system has been weakened by two main features associated with Lijphart's theory: first, the intertwined commitment to the grand coalition principle in forming governments, which extensively broadens the government size and undermines the value of merits in favour of representativeness when selecting ministers; proportionality that has affected not only the selection of ministers but also the appointment of senior civil servants who are also chosen on ethno-sectarian grounds with no regard to merits, which has paralysed the performance of the public service, delegitimised the elite and weakened the state at large. Secondly, identity prevalence in politics and the subsequent disturbances (Dodge,2020:147-150;2021 and 2023:11-12). Relatedly, Dodge (2023:2-5) believes that instability erupted in Iraq, as its constitution includes few or no power-sharing mechanisms, resulting in a weak system incapable of producing stability. Echoing this thinking, Visser (2012:232-233) contends that Iraq has limited formal power-sharing mechanisms. Bogaards (2019) argues that the Iraqi consensus democracy is in turmoil because the power-sharing there is not complete and informal. Abu Latif (2020) also believes that the consensus democracy in Iraq leads to weak power-sharing and instability due to the absence of two elements of the consensus democracy theory: grand coalition and mutual veto. This equation for Abulatif leads to permanent majority and permanent minority. Hay (2014;160-161) believes the Iraqi consensus democracy is incomplete and emphasises the lack of shared vision regarding the Iraqi state among communal groups.

**Table (3): classification of Iraq according to the Corruption Perceptions Index**

Year	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
Iraq Sequence	113	137	178	176	175	169	161	169	162	157	154
Total	133	158	179	180	182	174	167	180	180	180	180

(Source: Transparency International)

Proponents of consensus democracy in Iraq acknowledge the negative aspects of this form of democracy but mostly argue that it provides a better path of governance than majoritarian democracy. Moreover, they base their analysis on three main foundations: Iraq is a deeply divided country, and if the Shiite majority governs Iraq according to majoritarianism, the risk will be high as to the prospect that the country could fall into authoritarianism again or face disintegration (McGarry and O'Leary,2007:240). Regarding the

political participation of the elite, Alshamary (2023), and Baizidi (2024) stress that consensus democracy has involved all ethno-sectarian representatives in the political process through many high-level posts, contributing to reducing conflict. O’Driscoll and Costantini (2023:4-5) emphasise the pivotal role of inclusivity that gave each communal group a share in the state, which helped realise stability; thus, they argue that inclusivity played two critical roles in this regard: serving as a bulwark denying insurgencies the opportunity to fuel sectarian tension within the society; also, it contributed to holding Iraq united against partition.

In reviewing and analysing the above arguments about the status of consensus democracy in Iraq, they could be summarised as follows: proponents of that democracy focus mainly on its role in reducing conflict by addressing identity problems, while its opponents concentrate primarily on the dysfunctional performance of that democracy, especially the endemic corruption, poverty, and unemployment. Yet, both seemingly have one-dimensional perspectives, as each school focuses mainly on one side. This may be attributed to the shift of priorities in Iraq overtime after 2003. Namely, in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion, the main concern for many Iraqis was to protect their ethno-sectarian identity in an environment characterised by fear of marginalisation and potential civil war. Around a decade later, the new generations found identity politics no longer appealing, as they focused more on issue politics such as employment, poverty, better education, and health care services. Relatedly, most of the above arguments concentrate on various aspects linking consensus democracy and instability in Iraq. Still, they miss the overall or core problem generating this instability, which is the transitional characteristics of that democracy that can no longer accommodate the new demands emanating from rapidly changing social dynamics that have moved beyond the transition.

### **5. Identity and Stability in Iraq**

As stated earlier, the nexus between identity and stability occupies the core of consensus democracy’s philosophy. The identity transformation in Iraq expressed itself forcefully through mass protests that grew steadily from 2011 to 2015 and culminated remarkably in 2019, lasting for more than six months and involving millions of protesters who brought political life to a standstill by calling for abolishing consensus democracy (Haddad,2019 and 2022; Dodge and Mansour,2021). The protests represent a nationalist cross-



community platform versus the ethno-sectarian political system or a social mobilisation against the status quo by linking the consensus democracy with the dysfunctional performance (Table 2). The protests also serve as a forceful indicator that the society has largely moved past the transition, as divided societies often fail to produce big collective actions given the contrasting mobilisation tools distinguishing each communal group. Moreover, this section will examine the bottom-up political implications by highlighting the extent of identity transformation and how it affected the political trajectory.

Two main views on the variables that triggered the anti-ethno-sectarian sentiment: One tends to attribute it to broader developments related to consensus democracy, and the other focuses on specific variables. Alkudary argues that politicising the ethno-sectarian identity in 2003, which peaked excessively during the civil war and rise of terrorism, was reversed later to be expressed forcefully in mass protests driven by the consistent failure of consensus democracy, especially its poor performance in service provisions. Alkudary calls this new trend 'post-sectarian', as the protester's loyalty has been directed towards state rather than ethno-sectarian identities. This trend for Alkudary caused the protesters to feel that the political system had lost its justification. Additionally, the majority of protesters were Shiite, whose politicians had the upper hand politically, given the numerical majority of the Shiites. According to Alkudary, this development goes against the argument of consensus democracy advocates who claim that identities are rigid and difficult to change (Alkudary,2023). Jaber (2018:7-13) concurs with Alkudary about identity transformation by contending that protesters delegitimised the foundations of consensus democracy, and what united them was the vision for a civic state away from the ethno-sectarian identities. Significantly, Jaber distinguishes between the process of initiation of ethno-sectarianism in 2003, which shaped political activism in almost different parts, and the protests that represented a bottom-up movement signalling the move from identity to 'issue politics'.

On the other hand, O'Driscoll and Costantini (2023:5-6) contend that the protests were fueled by grievances related to corruption, unemployment, and inadequate essential services. So, the shift away from ethno-sectarian identity indicates that the consensus democracy that protesters viewed as enabling corruption reached its shelf life; thus, they called for removing that system. Dodge agrees with the above line of argumentation but tends to

focus specifically on corruption, which played a fundamental role in discrediting the ethno-sectarian ideology upon which consensus democracy was established as a source of legitimacy. Accordingly, the protesters sought to abolish the consensus democracy altogether (Dodge,2021 and 2023:12-13). Ali (2021:11-13) raises a critical point by attributing the decline of the ethno-sectarian identity after its dramatic rise in 2003 to the violence and politicising identity by arguing: “a mix of the experience of religious conservatisms, violence at the hands of religious and conservative militias, the rise of the Islamic State and its invasion of Mosul, all created a rejection of religion...”.

**Table (4): Rating Voter Turnout in the National Elections**

Election Year	January 2005	December 2005	2010	2014	2018	2021
<b>Voter Turnout</b>	58.32%	79.63%	60. 67%	60.53%	44.50%	41.%

(Source: Iraq High Electoral Commission)

**Table (5): The Variables of the State-Society Relations.**

Transition	Post-transition
Most people's demands revolve around identity (identity-based politics).	Demands revolve around better living conditions, employment, better services, and so on (issues-based politics).
Elections served as a channel to express people's demands.	Elections were largely replaced with mass protests to seek change and realise new demands.
Mostly, ethnic and Islamic political parties rely solely on ethno-sectarian ideology with a confrontational approach.	Progressive and reformist parties mostly focused on economic and social programs and cooperative approaches.
Each communal group is represented by almost one monolithic ethno-sectarian large political bloc.	Several conflicting political parties represent each communal group.
Horizontal; inter-group conflicts.	Vertical state vs society conflict.

In reviewing the above studies, it seems that all of them touched correctly on the drivers behind the decline of ethno-sectarian identity; yet, there are two missing factors: these studies have almost addressed one or a few dimensions of the problem, missing the broader picture or the roots of the problem, which is the rapid social change beyond the transition and ethno-sectarianism, making the largely transitional political system with its elitist nature and institutional rigidity fail to meet the new demands (inputs) and

become, conversely, a driver for instability. Also, these studies do not recognise that the consensus democracy seemingly contributed to this change not only through its poor performance but mainly through recognition and politicisation of identities that gave communal groups a sense of security, caused them to worry less about their identity, and, at the same time, encouraged the new generations to develop new demands away from the ethno-sectarian limitations; subsequently, the political behaviour started to distance itself from the ethno-sectarian grounds. This contributed to the rise of cross-cutting cleavages among the new generations, which the consensus democracy, with its transitional philosophy, could not accommodate, causing a gap between social and political dynamics to grow gradually in the form of chronic instability.

Such a crisis that appears in the post-transition is driven mainly by a theoretical gap associated with Lijphart's theory, mainly due to its emphasis on the elite, grand coalition that favours inclusion over moderation, undermining the political role of society, and subsequent institutional rigidity, which makes such composition serve ideally in realising stability in the transition when identity is a priority but not in the post-transition when demands move beyond identity. The theory above's emphasis can be arguably attributed to its original target, as the theory was derived from successful experiments in advanced countries (the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium and Austria) to be prescribed later for developing countries plagued by conflicts. This caused the theory to focus extensively on developing functioning mechanisms to tackle the immediate conflicts with little to no focus on ensuring durable stability in the post-transition.

The theory's flaws appeared in Iraq more evident than in other societies due to the fast societal transformation that consensus democracy cannot keep up with. Such transformation took three big turns: turning from authoritarianism to democracy, the civil war to the post-conflict era, and the transition to post-transition. Such transformations were driven mainly by three variables apart from the corruption and dysfunctionality of the consensus democracy. First, the segmental cleavages among the overwhelming majority of Iraqis are religious. These cleavages, as stated, can quickly transform into cross-cutting divisions in contrast to ethnic cleavages. Secondly, the existential shocks that the Iraqi society has gone through since 2003, such as waves of terrorism, a civil war, and armed clashes, to name a few, contributed to accelerating socio-political changes

away from the existing norms. Thirdly, the Shiites in Iraq constitute around 60 per cent of the population, creating a societal imbalance with other communal groups. Interestingly, the Shiite as a majority acted against Horowitz's famous argument that majorities accept consensus democracy when weak, but when they regain power, they may eliminate that democracy (Horowitz,2014:18-19). By contrast, the Shiites were the first to move towards post-transition by calling for a transformation into ordinary governance away from ethno-sectarianism, despite the latter giving them, as a majority communal group, an advantageous position after 2003. This partly pushed other communal groups, especially the youth, to follow suit.

Unlike Iraq, these flaws have not appeared visibly in other countries with consensus democracy, although they have followed this democracy for many decades. This could be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the societal makeup of most of these countries is largely ethnic, such as Belgium and Bosnia (Rochtus,2023; Smajljaj,2020), which, as stated, identity there does not transform as fast as those with religious cleavages. Secondly, unlike societies with mostly religious cleavages, such as Iraq<sup>1</sup> and Lebanon, most of the countries with ethnic societies, given the deep social divisions, follow federal systems with extensive autonomy granted to constituent units whose boundaries often correspond to the ethnic lines, which makes communal groups within these units less impacted by the dysfunctionality of the federal authorities where different contending elite engage. Overall, countries of ethnic cleavages with high communal identity priority and broad autonomy that enable communal groups to run their respective units efficiently and become, as such, less impacted by the dysfunctionality of federal authorities- are often marked by considerable consistency between social and political dynamics, which ultimately generate stability.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article reviewed current literature on the nexus of identity and stability under consensus democracy. While previous literature has focused mostly on realising stability in transition, this article highlighted that this stability is

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1.Except for the Kurdistan region of ethnic segmental cleavages, where federalism is applied, Iraq is still a unitary state: central authorities enjoy extensive competencies compared to governorates (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung,2022).

temporal in societies with mostly religious cleavages that move fast beyond identity politics and present, as such, new demands that consensus democracy, with its transitional philosophy, cannot accommodate. This produces a growing gap between post-transitional social dynamics and transitional politics to be expressed in chronic crises and instability.

This article aimed to provide a holistic review of most of the related research. It utilised that to contribute to the present literature by offering a fresh case: the Iraqi experiment of consensus democracy, which is widely neglected and considered an exceptional case. This deprives it of in-depth analytical insights that could mitigate its chronic crises and simultaneously deprives the consensus democracy theory broadly of chances to explore its limitations beyond the European and classical cases that could improve its mechanisms in realising durable stability.

The findings of this article indicate that despite consensus democracy being adopted following a rise in communal identity, which serves as a pivotal source of this democracy legitimacy, the decline of such identity later does not spell the end of such democracy because, once adopted, it gets deeply entrenched into almost all socio-political life. This reflects the core problem of such democracy when it continues working with its transitional aspects in a post-traditional society despite failing to meet the new demands. Such dysfunctionality and ensuing instability are driven mainly by a theoretical gap associated with Lijphart's theory, mainly due to its emphasis on the elite, favouring inclusion over moderation, undermining the political role of society and subsequent institutional rigidity, which serves ideally in realising stability in the transition when identity is a priority but not in the post-transition when demands move beyond identity, and it fails based on its transitional characteristics to adapt to such shifting trends. The theory's emphasis on the transition can be attributed to its original target, as it was derived from successful experiments in advanced countries to be prescribed later for developing countries plagued by conflicts. This caused the theory to focus extensively on developing functioning mechanisms to tackle the immediate conflicts with little to no focus on ensuring durable stability in the post-transition; besides, the theory is still new that it has not faced such fast social transformation as the case of Iraq, which revealed new limitations that are worthy of being studied.

Furthermore, the transition and post-transition seem more mutually exclusive than mutually reinforcing. The focus should be extended to post-

transition as it is of no less importance since it tackles long-term stability, and countries with a consensus democracy model cannot replace it easily, causing them to get stuck in a cycle of instability with no clear exit strategy. If we agree with Lijphart's argument that consensus democracy could work and realise stability in divided societies when he challenged Almond's argument that democracy broadly doesn't work in such societies, we assume that Lijphart's consensus democracy could work in transition but not in post-transition, when it becomes part of the problem, jeopardising not only stability but democracy broadly, after serving as part of the solution to the crisis of instability there. Moreover, the international community that heavily encourages consensus democracy as its favourite model for conflict-ridden countries should answer the question: does it want to freeze conflicts or find durable stability?

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