

# كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking\_The\_Mold

## Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Iraq

### The Protests of Electricity Sector's Employees in Iraq at the End of 2018 Demanding a Permanent Employment Contract

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#### CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

After Iraq adopted neoliberal policies after 2003 to reduce the state's role in providing services, privatize government service institutions and reduce the number of government sector employees and workers, a tendency has appeared to hire temporary employees and contractors instead of providing permanent employment or a permanent contract. In fact, relying on temporary work by governmental and non-governmental institutions aims to reduce production costs by reducing labor rights, guarantees, and wages (Qoroumi, 2018).

Electricity is one of the sectors that witnessed the employment of contractors or daily wage workers. Workers on temporary contracts and daily wages represent the massive majority of workers in this sector. In fact, the electricity sector in Iraq employs 33 thousand contractors and 8,500 daily wage workers (Tareeq Ashaab, 2018). Regardless of the sector's need for this number of workers, their specializations, or the process of their employment, according to political nepotism, real need or professional competence, the number of contractors in this sector exceeds the number of permanent workers, as almost 85% of the total contracts and wages of the production, transmission and distribution departments are monthly or daily contracts, while some worked temporarily for a period ranging between 10 and 12 years without gaining the rights of permanent workers. Furthermore, and during 6 years, workers in this sector waited for implementing the promises of providing them with a permanent employment contract, until this was fulfilled in March 2019, while the Ministry of Electricity has recently begun its administrative procedures to provide permanent employment to the contractors included by this ministerial decision.

The case study of "The Protests of Electricity Sector's Employees in Iraq at the End of 2018 Demanding a Permanent Employment Contract" will seek to answer how civil society influences the state's policies that have adopted neoliberal policies and appointed 33,000 contractors in the electricity sector. It also seeks to know the strategies that contractors have followed and the extent of the "protest" strategy's success in raising the voice of civil society to the decision-makers.

In addition, this case study will use the qualitative research methodology by reviewing the literature that has been written about this issue, conducting meetings with two activists in these two fields and following up on social media pages, most notably: the biggest campaign to demand permanent employment and contract rights at the Ministry of Electricity, contracts and wages at the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity until providing a permanent employment contract, and the demand for the right - contracts and wages at the Ministry of Electricity, and the electricity contracts revolution.

#### MOVEMENT TIMEFRAME OF CONTRACTORS IN THE ELECTRICITY SECTOR

Based on interviews conducted with activists working on temporary contracts in the electricity sector, employment on a temporary contract began in 2006. Although the issue of contract and wage workers in the electricity sector started a long time ago in a protest demanding, the present case study will focus on their campaign launched in April 2018 and ended with achieving their goals of a permanent employment contract.

Contractors objected to the fact that their wages are almost half lower than their permanent colleagues, as the wage worker receives 150,000 Iraqi dinars. In comparison, the contractor receives 300,000 Iraqi dinars, which is equivalent to \$250. They also do not receive any compensation if they suffer from any injury during work. They also enjoy fewer rights than a permanent employee does, despite doing the same work. Sometimes their payment is delayed. In addition, contractors and wage workers are deprived of the social guarantees that their colleague enjoys, such as health insurance, retirement, maternity leave, annual holidays, and sick leave (an interview with Ali S.), in addition to being subject to dismissal at any moment without obtaining any guarantees. Although the death cases due to electrical shocks are the third among all Iraqi sectors (an interview with Ali A.), their families do not receive any compensation, according to the “Electricity Contracts Revolution” page on social media. In fact, the Ministry of Electricity is the third ministry after Defense and Interior in terms of the number of victims resulting from work accidents or terrorist and criminal attacks.

### THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONTRACTORS IN MAKING AN IMPACT ON THE DECISION-MAKERS

The protests’ activists organized their own coordinative entities, but they did not establish trade unions “because they are prohibited from doing so due to the Freedom of Association Law legislation that suspended their benefit from Labor Law No. 37 that permits this benefit” (Interview with Abdul Karim Abdul Sada, President of the Workers Union Federation in Iraq). The head of Liberal Professions Unions (Kazem Abbas Rabat, in an interview in November 2018) confirmed that Al-Shahristani had warned of the existence of any trade union organization in the public sector in accordance with the previous regime’s decision that turned all state workers into employees and prohibited them from forming or joining unions. Therefore, contractors and wage workers resorted to forming their coordinative entities. One of the participating contractors asserted that there is “an absence of opposed unions, political parties and civil society organizations that adopt and defend their demands” (Interview with Ali A.). However, it is not clear whether the protesters relied on political parties, unions or civil society organizations to ask for their support.

Workers and engineers in the electricity sector organized themselves in coordinative entities in each of the governorates of Basra, Karbala, Mosul, Baghdad, Maysan, Al-Muthanna, Dhi Qar, Diyala, Ramadi and Samarra. The coordinative entities were horizontally correlated by establishing small groups on social media, especially via “WhatsApp”, to exchange proposals and make decisions. The entities in each city also formed local subgroups on social media so that the local coordination group is vertically linked to a group of coordinators according to the power stations in which they work. This means that a more sophisticated organization characterized the protests in 2018, according to an interview with Basra’s activist, which the protests were not distinguished by in recent years. This vertical networking with the coordinative entity members, and the horizontal networking with other coordinative entities, by using social media, allowed the protesters to manage their protests, lead them, direct them, and keep in touch with each other during the protests.

### STRATEGIES OF CONTRACTORS AND WAGE WORKERS

Contractors, wage workers and their coordinative entities adopted an accurate progressive policy of demonstrations, protests and strikes. First, they adopted the method of organizing demonstrations for a few hours per day in front of the governorate councils and electricity companies for separate days. Then, they organized protests if their demands were not achieved. The coordinative entities resorted to adopting the “protest” strategy



to exert pressure and recognize their rights to permanent employment since this method was already adopted, effective and peaceful (Ali A.). The protest aims to gather for several days in one tent in front of the relevant electricity company, to be continued for days, weeks or even months, day and night, to obtain their demands.

The protests began in April, in parallel with the start of new political parties’ election campaigns (2018-2022). This timing was chosen to withdraw promises from the candidates to Parliament. It then stopped to resume the eve of the new government’s formation and the country’s budget approval for 2019.

The protests took place at different times according to the cities’ situations. They continued in Basra for 36 days, compared to almost 3 months in Maysan (interview with Ali A.). In Mosul, workers made it clear in a report published in Tareeq Ashaab newspaper, issued by the Iraqi Communist Party, that “daily wage workers and contractors in Mosul electricity departments cannot protest as is the case of other governorates”. Therefore, workers adopted another method, which is “withdrawal of most of the contractors and wage workers from the work location” (Tareeq Ashaab, 2018). Thus, the protestors decided to go on strike until their demands were achieved. Reports published in Iraqi newspapers, such as Al-Mada newspaper, quoting the protesters, confirmed that they would partially withdraw from work to reduce damage in health institutions and prevent harm to patients due to power cuts, provided that they withdraw completely in the event of no response.

The coordinative entities also relied on the press and social media. Thus, they created private pages and WhatsApp groups. Despite various news in the local press and on satellite channels about protests of contractors and wage workers in the electricity sector, one of the Basra activists emphasized that “the media did not play a major role in defining public opinion or raising the issue of contractors and wage workers. Media consists half the battle for it brings the attention of others to our cause” (Interview with Ali A.).

The coordinative entities also resorted extensively to meetings with state officials, Members of Parliament, and parties’ representatives. The protests collected almost 150 signatures from Members of Parliament to ensure their vote on permanent employment when the 2019 budget was approved.





*Demonstrations in Maysan demanding permanent employment for contractors in the electricity sector (photo from the Baghdad Post)*

## INFLUENCING FACTORS AND TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENT

The continued protests over 9 months played a role in extorting pressure on the government and parliament to meet the protesters' demands. The new government and the new independent Minister of Electricity designate, Luay Al-Khatib, supported the contractors and wage workers. According to the field research, the new Minister of Electricity designate provided an opportunity to open a new policy method for workers to obtain their rights, as "the new minister expressed his understanding and support for the demands of contractors and wage workers" (interview with Ali S.).

On the other hand, the protesters and their allies from Members of Parliament sought to allocate funds within the 2019 budget to cover the cost of providing a permanent employment contract for workers at the ministries, including workers of the Ministry of Electricity. The Iraqi Parliament approved the decision issued in January 2019 in the Official Gazette of Iraq, which is specialized in publishing laws and legislation.

## POLITICAL RESULTS

Parliament approved its decision to compel the Prime Minister to appoint employees of contracts in the electricity sector and find the necessary financial allocations to coordinate with the Ministry of Finance and Electricity. However, it gave the prime minister the competencies to approve contractors' appointments in other government institutions that deal with education and health. Coordinative entities and contractors considered a major victory for their demands (interview with Ali S., March 2019).

However, many social media pages, particularly in the electricity sector, were cautiously pleased with the decision to provide permanent employment for contractors. This is due to the lack of complete confidence in the government's decisions and because the decision did not include the 8,500 wage workers in the electricity sector, as the demonstrations continued in some cities, such as Maysan. Wage workers organized a demonstration on March 20, 2019, to call for the state to provide them with a permanent employment contract. They threatened to stop working if their demands were not met, and the direct effects that this would have on citizens, particularly in the health sector.

The neoliberal policies adopted by Iraq were subjected to severe pressure from large sectors. The Parliament's decision to allocate a budget to provide a permanent employment contract for contractors is only an affirmation of the pressure exerted by civil society to reform the state's policy, appoint workers in the electricity sector and give them equal rights as permanent workers.

## CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Many lessons can be learned from the experience of contractors in the electricity sector in Iraq:

**First:** The choice of coordinative entities and contractors with specific political periods to launch their activities (such as on the eve of each of the elections, the formation of the government, the designation of a new electricity minister and the approval of the budget), was crucial in terms of the sensitivity of the political circumstance enabling them to achieve their goals. However, perpetuating the campaign's momentum in normal times would positively affect maintaining pressure on the state to meet their demands, especially those who are still looking for a permanent employment contract.

**Second:** Contractors and wage workers did not send their families and members of their families to protests during their campaign to exert pressure to provide them with a permanent employment contract. However, their families are the most affected by low wages and the loss of rights and social guarantees. Therefore, it is essential to mobilize families in this protest to give the protesters additional power.

**Third:** Acknowledgment of weakness in establishing a relationship with the media to mobilize public opinion in favor of providing a permanent employment contract for contractors led the campaign to lose potential capabilities and resources to mobilize public opinion, thus, succeeding in their campaign and weakening the impact of international institutions' pressures calling for reducing the state's costs by stopping government designations.

**Fourth:** Coordination and joint work between wage workers and contractors may support workers' negotiation capacity in the electricity sector and other sectors. This means that networking with those with common demands in other sectors such as education and health may benefit everyone. While the lack of coordination between contractors in the electricity sector and other economic sectors may lose strength elements of the campaign that can be invested and built upon to reach the campaign's goals.

Finally, the protest was as an effective and peaceful movement strategy that was able to impose changes in decision-making related to the economic and living rights of workers in the electricity sector by taking into consideration that daily wage workers are still waiting for whether the government would put the decisions and laws in effect or not



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## BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

## THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

## THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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