

## **Review: A People's History of Iraq**

**A People's History of Iraq: The Iraqi Communist Party, Workers' Movements, and the Left 1924–2004 by Ilario Salucci, Anthony Arnove (Preface by), and Tariq Ali (Introduction by) Haymarket Books, 208 pgs. April 2005**

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This slim volume focuses almost exclusively on the activities of the Iraq Communist Party (ICP) and is a powerful antidote to the patronizing orientalism many leftists and anti-war activists have towards Iraq. Through the lens of the ICP, Salucci shatters the illusion that Iraq is a backward, undeveloped society dominated exclusively by a reactionary political Islam without any substantial leftist history. Revealed is a society that grows from a British-installed monarchy with an agrarian economy, through a period of communist resistance to the monarchy and colonial exploitation that was interwoven with tribal and peasant uprisings, to the labor struggles of an emerging industrial proletariat centered on the oil industry. Salucci illuminates this with a very useful chronology of events, many statistics regarding land distribution, domestic production, and occupational employment, and a historical narrative of the many strikes and uprisings during the twentieth century. Even with these other details, the text will not serve well as a general history of Iraq, as it is focused almost exclusively on the politics and fluctuations of the ICP. This is both a strength and a weakness of the book.

The ICP has generally argued that it needed to support a bourgeois revolution against the monarchy and feudal interests in Iraq, that would then set up a bourgeois government which would develop Iraq on an industrial basis. The problem with this strategy\* is that the bourgeoisie as a class in Iraq has always been weak and small, tied first to the interests of land-owning sheikhs. It was never able to seize the state or industrially develop Iraq.

Instead, the military took power and developed Iraq, creating a middle class dependent completely on the growing state apparatus for their position. It was the military officers and state bureaucrats that the Ba'ath party made its base of support. While the ICP claimed to be organizing in the interests of the working class and peasants in Iraq, it continually sidelined the demands of the oppressed classes to support the weak interests of the bourgeoisie.

The Iraqi Communist Party continued to engage in actions that seem short-sighted, opportunistic, and counter-revolutionary, as they on one hand tried to make some accommodation with the existing state and military (when the state and military would tolerate them), and on the other hand advanced the interests of the petite-bourgeoisie (even when that class was incapable of advancing its own interest). Such logic led the ICP to oppose land reform in the 1950s. Further, arguing that Iraq should develop into its own bourgeois republic, the party opposed the Nasserite and Ba'athist pan-Arab socialist position of uniting with Syria and Egypt. Even after decades of repression by the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein, including periods during which it engaged in armed struggle against the state, the ICP continued to try to make itself available to the regime. In one of its greatest misjudgments, it chose not to oppose Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and had little presence in the uprising following the Iraqi army's withdrawal.

At various times, elements of the ICP have rejected its dominant ideology of supporting the bourgeoisie, instead forming various splits influenced by Maoism, Guevarism, and the ultra-left. The book's inclusion of a speech by Qasim Hasan (Nazim) to the Comintern in 1935 alongside a 2003 statement by the Central Committee of the ICP shows how far the ICP has drifted in its revolutionary commitments. This drift has included opportunistically joining the U.S.-propped-up governing council, a collaborationist gambit which has not led to any sort of gains for the ICP in the most recent elections.

Salucci also more sympathetically describes the Workers Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI) which has always rejected the U.S. occupation, and primarily focuses on social mobilization, mass protest and organizing among the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), the Union of the Unemployed of Iraq (UUI), and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq

(OWFI) as a way of building towards revolution. The WCPI has rejected both the collaborationist route of the ICP and the armed struggle being waged by “Islamic fascism”.

## **“The Shoras Will Heal the Wounds of Kurdistan’s Exploited!” — slogan from the 1991 uprising**

With the exception of a passing paragraph reference to the shora uprisings in 1991 and inclusion of a “Statement of the Sulaimaniya Shora,” there is little in Salucci’s book about one of the most recent significant events in Iraq’s left history. With the defeat of the Iraqi army in Kuwait, troops deserted and mutinied as they returned to southern Iraq. Simultaneously in the north, workers’ councils (shoras) were setup in Sulaimaniya, Hawlir, Kirkuk, Rania and Nasro Bareeka.

Considering the involvement of the “March of Communism” Group, Communist Perspective, and other groups to the left of the ICP, and considering the role the shora uprising had in popular consciousness and the regroupment of the extreme left in Iraq into the WCPI, it seems odd that Salucci did not devote more discussion to this uprising, its suppression, and its effects on the Iraqi working class. For example, Jalal Talibani, as leader of the PUK (supported by the U.K.), and Masud Barzani, as leader of the KDP (supported by the U.S.A.), played substantial roles in the cooptation and suppression of the shora uprising. With the recent elections at the end of 2005, Barzani and Talibani have worked out that Talibani will continue to be president of Iraq.

For more information about the Shoras in 1991, readers may want to review “The Kurdish Uprising...” pamphlet, as well as “10 Days that Shook Iraq” by Wildcat UK.

## **Are There Any Women in Iraq? Or Are They Just Not People?**

Given the lack of discussion in this book, it would not appear that women exist in Iraq. Women’s organizations in Iraq are at least as old as the ICP: in 1924 the Women’s Empowerment Society (Jameat al Nahda al-Nisaeya) was formed, followed by the Kurdish Women’s Foundation in 1928. Considering Salucci’s focus on the ICP, it is strange that he did not even mention the foundation of the ICP-supported League for the Defense of Women’s Rights in the early 1950s. The League reached a membership of 40,000 between 1958 and 1963, and published a weekly periodical titled “14 July.”

In 1968, the Ba’ath party banned other political parties and independent civil-society organizations, including women’s groups. Certain rights were codified by the government, including divorce and child custody. Still, the state decreed that except where spelled out by state law, the sharia would still be followed. The Ba’ath formed the General Federation of Iraqi Women in 1969. The GFIW, through its control of 250 rural and urban communities, offered job training, education, and other social programs to women. The GFIW was also the only legal channel through which women could lobby for\* reforms in regard to their status under the law and personal status code. By 1997, 47% of all Iraqi women were members of the GFIW. Many women still criticized the GFIW as a propaganda arm of the state.

Advances in women’s rights continued under the Ba’ath regime into the 1980s, with women gaining the right to stand for election in parliament and local government. Education became mandatory for girls, and literacy programs became available for adults—by 1987, 75% of Iraqi

women were literate. Women could join the large civil service workforce, where laws were established for equal pay for equal work, maternity benefits, and freedom from harassment.

During the Iraq-Iran war, the participation of women in the civil service workforce soared to 70%. Yet, the government also banned contraception. With the end of the Iraq-Iran war and the failure to hold Kuwait with the Gulf War, women were displaced from employment by the demobilization of male Iraqi soldiers. Saddam Hussein's adoption of Islamization further eroded gains made by women. In 1990, men were exempted from prosecution for "honor killings". Hussein's "Campaign for Faithfulness", supposedly against prostitution, was used to behead political opponents and doctors.

By 1998, all women working as secretaries for government agencies were dismissed; by 2000, restrictions were placed on women working outside the home; travel abroad by women became restricted, co-ed education was eliminated, and the female literacy dropped to 25%. In the nominally independent Kurdish area to the north, where the ICP and WCPI could operate openly, there was still a deterioration of women's rights, with increasing honor killings and women being driven out of workplaces and universities.

Women also suffered greatly from increasing mortality and malnutrition under the difficulties resulting from the U.S.-supported economic sanctions against Iraq. The U.S. Occupation policy of de-Ba'athification abolished the GFIW. Iraq under U.S. occupation does not appear sympathetic to feminism, as the CPA and the new government seem quite willing to continue the oppression of women to gain support from Islamist political parties. With the end of the GFIW, however, civil society has begun to regenerate—an attempt by the government to introduce the Sharia was met by demonstrations called by 25 women's organizations.

Considering the degree of organization of women in Iraq, the gains in equality made and lost, the massive involvement and then removal of women in the workforce, and the involvement of the left in women's struggles, Salucci's avoidance of women and feminism is a glaring fault with this book.

Even though this short book does not sufficiently address the politics of the Ba'ath, pan-Arab socialism, the left wing of Kurdish nationalism, the shoras, or feminism, it is still a very useful reference and introduction to a history of the left in Iraq, and is highly recommended for those who would like a brief introduction. With no sign of an end to the occupation by the U.S. in sight, developments in Iraq will continue to dominate our attention.

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