

The Heroic Legacy
of the
Iraqi Communist
Party

by Prakash Karat

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Is there a Communist Party in Iraq? If so, what has it been doing? The news that the first newspaper to be circulated in Baghdad after the American occupation was published by the Communist Party came as a surprise to many.

A brief description of the stormy and heroic story of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) is given here. It is only a bare sketch of the main events, but it should help the reader to understand the eventful and tragic history of a Party that grew to be the largest Communist Party in the Middle East. It became the most influential force in the country at the time of the July 1958 revolution which overthrew the British supported regime and established a republic.

The ICP suffered serious bouts of repression, the worst being in 1963. No other Communist Party, with the exception of the Indonesian Party, faced such brutal terror as the Party in Iraq.

The saga of the ICP and its tortuous ups and downs is most vividly and authoritatively documented in Hanna Batuta's *The Old Classes and Revolutionary Movements in Iraq: A Study of Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* (Princeton 1978). This remarkable book is the basis for much of the information on the ICP in this article.

There is an interesting parallel in the way Communist ideas developed in India and Iraq. Both were British colonies in the 1920s. In both countries,

the anti-imperialist fighters got inspiration from the Russian Great October Socialist Revolution.

BEGINNING OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The first intellectual to be influenced by Marxist ideas in Iraq was Husain al-Rahhal. His parents decided to send him for studies in Europe. He boarded a ship from Basra that went to Karachi enroute to Europe. Rahhal disembarked at Karachi and spent more than a year in India.

It is reported that his stay in India brought him in touch with radical ideas which further matured during his studies in Europe. Like many western educated young people of his generation, the reading of *Labour Monthly* edited by Rajani Palme Dutt, which was available in Baghdad, helped him to understand Communist politics.

The first Marxist study circle (Jamati) was set up by Rahhal along with some of his friends in 1924 and included Mahmud Ahmad Sayyid, one of the first novelists of Iraq.

The years 1920 to 1932 was the period of direct British rule of Iraq under the mandate provided by the League of Nations. It is in this period that industry and railways developed throwing up a modern working class. The first organised strike was by the railway workers in 1927 and the first union was set up by the railway workers in 1929.

The ICP was founded in 1934. It was preceded by the work of Communist groups in places like Basra in southern Iraq which threw up the first organiser and outstanding leader of the Communist Party. His name was Yusuf Salman Yusuf who came to be known as Fahd (the Leopard). Fahd was selected by the Comintern to study at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.

Fahd was arrested in 1933 and he became the first Iraqi to defend himself in court as a Communist.

REPRESSION OF IRAQI GOVERNMENTS

The Communist Party became the leading Left force in the country fighting against imperialism and the oppression of the feudal landlords.

Right from the beginning, the fledgling Party had to face severe repression at the hands of the successive Iraqi governments which were under the tutelage of the British.

In 1935, the secretary of the Party, Asin Flayyeh, was arrested and the party's printing press confiscated. In August 1937, the parliament declared communism in Iraq illegal. The penal code provided for punishment by death or penal servitude for life for dissemination of communism among the armed forces or the police.

Fahd took over as General Secretary of the Party in 1941 and under his leadership the Party consolidated its organisation and his activities enhanced the prestige among the people.

The heroic struggle of the Soviet people against Nazi Germany attracted more people to Communist ideology. In 1944 the first Party conference was held which drafted the Party's national charter. This charter was approved by the first national congress of the Party in April 1945. The Congress elected a central committee.

The Iraqi Communist Party was not based on any single community or ethnic group. Right from the outset it attracted the best men and women from all sections of the working people and the intelligentsia.

In the 1940s, the cadres and leaders were drawn from Arab Shias and Sunnis and the Kurds were always a significant proportion. Members from the minorities, Christians and Jews (till the fifties) were found in the leadership. In fact, Fahd, the most important leader was of Christian origin.

The Baath Party, which forcibly supplanted the ICP, borrowed many of the progressive features of the Communists, though it distorted them in practice. The only legacy of the days of the anti-imperialist struggle which the Baath could not abandon was the secular character of the State.

The period 1944 to 1946 saw the expansion of trade union activities and out of the 16 trade unions formed in this period 12 were led by the Communist Party. During this period, the Communist Party set up its units in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Party consistently supported the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people and later for their autonomy. The first peasant uprising against a landed sheikh in the Iraqi countryside took place in the village of Arbat in 1947.



**Iraqis confront a US soldier.
Occupiers Out! is the demand of the people**



Martyrs of the Iraqi Communist Party

The growing activities and mass influence of the ICP alarmed the puppet government and their British mentors. A serious blow was struck at the Party when Fahd and several leaders were arrested in January 1947. They were charged with conspiring to overthrow the government. Fahd and another member of the Polit Bureau Zaki Basin were sentenced to death. Because of an international campaign to save their lives, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

It is during this period that the ICP emerged as the key political force in the country when the great national uprising known as Al-Wathbah (the Leap) took place in January 1948.

The uprising was sparked off by the signing of the Portsmouth Treaty between the British and Iraqi governments. The treaty continued to subjugate Iraq with military bases and other curbs on its sovereignty.

Hundreds of thousands of people, led by the Communists, demonstrated in the streets of Baghdad. Four hundred people were shot dead in the streets of the city by police manning machine guns. The prime minister fled the country and the government was forced to repudiate the treaty.

Along with the mass upsurge came a wave of workers' strikes and in April 1948 the historic march from Haditha oil pumping station by 3000 workers to Baghdad 250 kms away, electrified the country.

The reactionary government gradually regained control after declaring a state of emergency. The repression that followed saw hundreds of Communists being held and sentenced in summary trials. General Secretary Fahd and two members of the Polit Bureau Zaki Basim and Al Shabibi who were in prison were retried and sentenced to death. Their sentences were carried out in the middle of the night.

As he was led to the gallows Fahd declared defiantly that "we have bodies and thoughts; you may destroy our bodies but not our thoughts".

The bodies of the three leaders were hung for display in three different parts of the city to terrorise the people. The repression against the Communists made the ICP known as the "Party of martyrs" and the respect and admiration of the people for the Party grew immensely.

ANOTHER WAVE OF MASS STRUGGLES

In the early fifties, the Communist Party rebuilt itself and a new youthful leadership took up the challenge. Another wave of mass struggles developed culminating in the Intifada (uprising) in November 1952.

A feature of this was the struggle of peasants against the landlords under the leadership of the peasant societies organised by the Party. The army was called in to suppress the revolts. At the end of 1954, the Party decided to organise a national committee for the union of soldiers and officers as more and more soldiers became politically active in the mass struggles and movements. The period up to 1958 saw the steady ascent of the Party and the growth of its mass organisations.

Thus the Party was positioned to be the main force in the revolutionary uprising which took place in July 1958 that overthrew the hated puppet regime and saw the nationalist army led by Gen. Qasim take power. By 1959, 250,000 workers had joined trade unions; there were 3000 peasant associations in the villages representing 200,000 peasants; the Iraqi Women's League had 20,000 members and the Democratic Youth Federation 84,000 members. Significantly, a number of army officers and soldiers also joined the Communist Party.

The Communists played a significant role in the revolutionary upheaval of 1958. The Party's growing power frightened the new ruling circles and the national bourgeoisie. The influence of the Communist Party was at its height and land reform measures and labour laws had to be brought in to meet the popular demands.

Big demonstrations took place demanding that the Communists be included in the new government but the nationalist army officers and the bourgeoisie refused to consider such a demand.

On the 1st of May 1959, 300,000 people marched through Baghdad raising the demand for the participation of the Communist Party in the government. The Party withdrew the demand to be a part of the government in July 1959. The Central Committee took this decision stating that there were serious misgivings among various sections of the bourgeoisie and moderate forces.

The reformist section in the Party leadership prevailed. The giving up of this demand led to repression being stepped up against the Communists. By 1960 a new round of attacks began.

The Qasim regime refused to legalise the Communist Party when it applied for a licence at a time when all other parties were granted recognition.

Later the Party recognised its mistake in retreating from the slogan of setting up of a revolutionary democratic government with Communist participation.

The line of capitulating to Qasim and the national bourgeoisie was also adopted because of the influence of the CPSU. It may be recalled that it was in the late fifties (after the 20th Congress of the CPSU) that the Soviet Party began advocating the line of uniting with the national bourgeoisie and undermining the independent role of the Communist Party. The Iraqi Party, like many other parties in the third world, did not escape the consequences of the Soviet dictated approach.

The new republic set up in 1958 marked the emergence of the truly independent state of Iraq.

Qasim under the influence of progressive forces introduced a whole range of measures that broke with the old pro-imperialist regime. Iraq withdrew from the Baghdad Pact and the British military bases were vacated, a programme of land reforms and legal rights for trade unions and other democratic organisations were announced.

An important step taken by the Qasim government was to clip the wings of the Iraq Petroleum Company which was owned by the Anglo-American oil companies. The government decided to severely restrict the company's right to exploitation of the concessions granted to it.

But a radical regime relying on Communist support was something that the national bourgeoisie could not countenance for long. The Qasim regime weakened itself by striking at the main pillar of its support – the Communists.

Qasim became increasingly isolated from other political parties due to his autocratic ways and the stage was set for the reactionary coup in February 1963.

A section of the nationalist armed forces officers joined hands with the Baath Party to overthrow Qasim who was executed. It was only the Communists who brought out the people from the slums of Baghdad armed with sticks to face the tanks and machine guns. The resistance to the coup was crushed by superior military force.

DARKEST PERIOD

The ousting of Qasim led to a ferocious bloodbath of the Communists. It was the darkest period for the ICP. At least 3000 Communists were executed and thousands more were jailed.

It is reported that the CIA handed over lists of Communists to the Baath leaders and the coup plotters before the coup began. The first secretary of the Party, Husain ar-Radi, was arrested from his hideout. He was brutally tortured for four days and died without divulging anything to the torturers.

The terror against the Communists and progressives in the days after the coup d'etat was worse than what the Pinochet regime inflicted upon the Left in Chile a decade later.

The National Guard of the Baathist Party dragged out Communists held in detention under the Qasim regime and shot them. The Iraqi Communist Party sources put the number of their members and supporters killed during the first three days of the coup at 5000. Sports grounds, military camps and schools were turned into concentration camps and interrogation centres for tens of thousands of people from all walks of life. The Party had to retreat and set up its partisan forces in the Kurdish areas.

The Baath regime did not last long and fell in November 1963. Those who took over the reins of power consisted of a coalition of army officers who were pan-Arab nationalists and Nasserites who looked to Egypt for inspiration. The military regime lasted until 1968 when the Baath Party staged a comeback through a military coup carried out with the help of a section of the army officers.

From then onwards the Baath Party manoeuvred to consolidate its position while eliminating all opposition. In its drive for total hegemony, the Baath Party continued its repression of the Communist Party.

The brutal suppression of the Communists continued until 1971 even though the ICP called for a constitutional framework embodying democratic principles with free elections, the solution of the Kurdish problem based on autonomy and the abolition of concessions to foreign companies.

The ICP called for the formation of a patriotic front of all progressive forces and a coalition government. The Baath Party was faced with an international situation where it could take steps to break the stranglehold of the Iraq Petroleum Company.

The necessity to modernise capitalism required that the oil resources be used to accumulate capital. Relations with the Soviet Union took a new turn when the Iraqi government sought its help in oil production and the first agreement was signed in 1969.

After prolonged negotiations in 1971-72 the Baath Party came to an agreement with the ICP to form a progressive and patriotic national front on the basis of a national action charter. Two Communist ministers joined the government.

By 1978 the Baath Party turned against the Communists once again. It removed all representatives of the ICP in the patriotic front and they were arrested. In May 1978, 31 members and supporters of the ICP were executed on the pretext that they had set up Communist Party cells in the armed forces.

Underlying this new attack on the Communists was the burgeoning oil income after the sharp rise in oil prices in 1974. An understanding was arrived at with the Shah of Iran that helped the regime to stabilise. The Iraqis conceded the vital Shatt-al-Arab waterway to Iran in return for an undertaking to close the Iranian border to the Kurdish fighters from Iraq and suspension of military aid to them.

In April 1979, the ICP declared that the patriotic front had ceased to be an alliance and had been converted into an instrument of the Baath Party. The ICP announced its open opposition to the Baath regime in 1979, the year Saddam Hussein took full powers as President. Later that year the Communist partisan units were set up in the Kurdish areas.

Ever since the Baathists came to power they sought to suppress the Kurds by military means. Between March 1974 and early 1975 a large number of civilians were killed in the Kurdish areas due to the Iraqi army operations.

The Iraqi Communist Party forged an alliance with the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Kurdish Socialist Party in 1980 and vowed to continue the armed struggle against the regime. Since then, the Party has been an underground opposition force having suffered terrible losses following the policy of Baathisation of Iraqi society and the establishment of a one-Party authoritarian regime.

Many years later, when the US was set to attack Iraq, the ICP opposed any military intervention by America. Faced with the prospects of an American invasion of Iraq, the ICP refused to join the meeting of the opposition groups sponsored by the Americans in London in November 2002 which was meant to prepare the ground for setting up a pliant regime after the occupation of Iraq. The ICP opposed the Saddam regime and the American occupation.

As the Iraqi people brace themselves for a prolonged resistance to the American occupation and the imposition of a puppet regime, the ICP is once again poised at the crossroads.

It has to face the challenge of developing a powerful democratic resistance to the imperialist occupation while building the mass base of the Party. In doing so, it will have to contend with the Islamist forces who wish to convert Iraq into a theocratic state.

The rich and heroic legacy of the ICP in its first six decades should stand it in good stead in the difficult but challenging days ahead.

