



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Education and Experience: Criteria for Ministerial Appointments in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

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This paper analyzes the selection criteria for ministerial appointments in Iraq, focusing on the role of educational qualifications and professional experience in political leadership. It examines the balance between academic knowledge and practical experience, assessing their impact on governance, crisis management, and public trust. Drawing from qualitative interviews with various stakeholders, including politicians, academics, and civil servants, the study identifies gaps in the current selection process and proposes recommendations for reform. The findings highlight the necessity of a balanced approach to ensure competent governance.

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INTRODUCTION

"Effective political communication has transformative power, shaping not only policies but the very foundation of governance (Denton & Kuypers, 2007). In the modern era, communication is more than a tool—it's an art essential to government functioning (McNair, 2017). Political communication is particularly crucial during crises, influencing decision-making and policy formulation. A politician's ability to effectively navigate these responsibilities depends on certain key criteria, including academic qualifications, experience, and relevant skills (Teferra, 2018; Annesley et al., 2019).

The criteria for selecting political leaders in Iraq lack sufficient emphasis on educational qualifications, professional experience, and human capital considerations, which poses significant challenges for governance and crisis management. This gap became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as poor decision-making severely impacted the education and health sectors, exposing their vulnerability and inefficiencies in leadership responses (Ali et al., 2020; Martín-Sánchez et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, Iraq faced critical challenges, including the inadequate transition to online education and severe strains on healthcare systems, highlighted by tragic incidents like the Nasiriyah and Baghdad hospital fires in 2021 caused by an oxygen tank explosion in COVID-19 isolation wards (Jangiz, 2021). These events culminated in the resignation of the then Minister of Health, emphasizing the consequences of leadership gaps and ineffective policy decisions (France News, 2021). The situation was further complicated by educational policy changes, corruption scandals involving fake academic credentials, and questionable practices by politicians pursuing degrees while in office, raising questions about the role of academic qualifications in political effectiveness and integrity (Raydan, 2021; Baban, 2021; Elameer, 2021; Al-Aalem, 2023).

Moreover, the absence of clear, standardized qualifications for leadership appointments has led to political figures with limited educational backgrounds occupying high offices, which has historically allowed exploitation by powerful political factions and impacted the quality of governance (Al-Jaffal, 2021; Official Gazette of Iraqi, 2020). Although recent reforms require a minimum of a Bachelor's degree for political leadership roles, they fall short in considering professional experience and expertise, which are critical for effective governance and policy-making (Official Gazette of Iraqi, 2023; Thygesen, 2019; Peveri, 2022).

The current approach to appointing cabinet members, characterized by power-sharing agreements and decisions made by the Prime Minister, further emphasizes political affiliations over merit, experience, and competence (BBC News, 2018; Phillips, 2005). The result is a selection process that often overlooks the principles of Human Capital Theory, where stronger educational backgrounds and professional expertise are vital for effective leadership in times of crisis.

This paper aims to explore the deficiencies in the selection criteria for political leadership in Iraq, assessing their impact on governance effectiveness, crisis management, and public trust. It seeks to understand the broader implications of these deficiencies on Iraq's political landscape and propose strategies for reform to enhance the integrity, competence, and accountability of political leaders. So, this study focuses on political communication as it relates to the appointment of Iraqi ministers, aiming to establish a criterion for these appointments based on an analysis of the existing literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will describe a literature review related to the current study.

2.1 Politicians and academic qualifications

The need for academic qualifications for politicians is a contentious topic, with many arguing that the alignment between a politician's academic background and their political responsibilities is crucial for effective governance. Pattanayak (2018) posits that a mismatch in academic qualification and political role can hinder a minister's ability to understand complex information, which may adversely affect decision-making. However, this argument assumes a direct correlation between academic background and the ability to govern, potentially overlooking other factors such as leadership skills, practical experience, and emotional intelligence that also contribute significantly to effective political decision-making.

Ranjana (2020) underscores the importance of educational qualifications for politicians, suggesting that a minimum level of education should be a prerequisite to run for office. In Iraq, for instance, the qualification criteria were recently elevated in 2023, requiring a Bachelor's degree, with exceptions for Christian, Yazidi, and Faili Kurds (Al-Jaffal, 2021). While this reform aims to professionalize the political sphere, it raises questions about whether a blanket requirement for a Bachelor's degree ensures better governance or merely serves as a formalistic barrier to entry. The exclusion of certain groups from this requirement also invites criticism regarding equity and inclusivity in political representation.

The viewpoint that politicians should possess advanced degrees, such as a PhD or Master's, as argued by Grigsby (2019), may seem ideal for fostering informed leadership. However, the assumption that higher education necessarily translates into better leadership does not account for practical decision-making abilities and on-ground experiences that are often required in political life. Similarly, Indiabix (2021) emphasizes that low-qualified politicians struggle with global changes and diplomatic complexities, advocating for minimum academic standards. However, this perspective potentially risks narrowing the scope of political leadership to academic achievement, neglecting other crucial competencies such as negotiation skills, emotional intelligence, and local cultural knowledge.

Moreover, the argument presented by debate.org (2022), that education is essential for political candidates as it enhances societal welfare, has its limitations. While education may provide foundational knowledge, leadership in complex political environments often requires skills that are developed through experience, mentorship, and personal growth rather than academic instruction alone. The critique here is whether the overemphasis on academic qualifications may exclude individuals who possess significant real-world insights and leadership potential but lack formal degrees.

2.2 Politicians and experience

The debate on the necessity of experience in politics hinges on the idea that practical, hands-on experience is a critical factor for competent governance. Unlike academic qualifications, experience provides a "know-how" that is often acquired through on-the-job training rather than academic learning (Cramer, & Toff, 2020). The emphasis on experience is supported by The Morning Consult (2019), where a survey revealed that 66% of Americans prioritize political experience when selecting candidates, reflecting a preference for seasoned leaders over newcomers. The memory of Trump's election in 2016, which was marked by a perceived lack of political experience, reinforces the value that the public places on experience in political leadership.

Hochman (2020) supports the notion that politicians with experience are perceived as more trustworthy, emphasizing the role of volunteering and early career engagements in political development. However, this raises questions about whether experience alone is a sufficient metric for effective governance. A politician might have years of experience but may lack other essential leadership qualities or may be entrenched in traditional political practices, potentially stifling innovation and progressive change.

Peveri (2022) argues that politicians who have held significant offices before assuming power tend to perform well, suggesting that experience at various levels of government equips individuals with skills necessary for higher office. Thygesen (2019) further proposes that politicians should possess at least seven years of professional work experience before entering the legislature, highlighting the need for exposure to work-related pressures, leadership roles, and fiscal management. However, these criteria can be critiqued for potentially limiting entry into politics, thereby excluding diverse perspectives and younger leaders who may bring fresh ideas and approaches to governance.

While the literature supports the importance of experience for political efficacy, there is an underlying assumption that experience equates to competence. The overemphasis on experience might undermine the potential for new entrants who can bring innovative ideas and disrupt traditional power dynamics. It also raises the critical issue of how the quality and nature of experience, rather than its duration, contribute to effective political leadership.

The literature presents a dual perspective on the role of academic qualifications and experience in political leadership. While qualifications are seen as a means to ensure informed decision-making, there is a risk of overlooking other leadership competencies. Experience is valued for practical governance skills, yet an overemphasis on it may hinder new and diverse leadership from emerging.

A balanced approach that considers both education and experience, while allowing room for other competencies, may be crucial for developing effective political leadership.

METHODOLOGY

This section will describe the methodology implemented in this study.

3.1 Informants and procedures

This qualitative study applies Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to explore the views of various stakeholders on the role of education and experience in political leadership. Using purposive expert sampling, the study will select 8 participants: 5 Iraqi politicians, 1 civil servant, 1 academic scholar, and 1 media representative, to provide in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews will serve as the main data collection method, allowing for flexible probing into the participants' viewpoints. All participants will have at least 4 years of relevant experience and diverse academic backgrounds. Using purposive expert sampling ensures a focused selection of individuals who can offer a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between education, experience, and political leadership in Iraq, while maintaining strict ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality.

Table 1: Informant background

| No | Code | Category | Experience | Qualifications |
|----|------|-------------------|------------|----------------|
| 1 | A1 | Iraqi politicians | 4 years | PhD |
| 2 | A2 | Iraqi politicians | 20 years | Master |
| 3 | A3 | Iraqi politicians | 8 years | Bachelor's |
| 4 | A4 | Iraqi politicians | 19 years | Bachelor's |
| 5 | A5 | Iraqi politicians | 4 years | PhD |
| 6 | B1 | Academic Scholars | 28 years | PhD |
| 7 | C1 | Civil Servants | 27 years | Master |
| 8 | D1 | Media | 20 years | Bachelor's |

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis will be conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to identify key themes and insights from the interview data. The software ATLAS.ti will be utilized to facilitate the coding process, organize the data, and manage the themes effectively. This tool will enable a systematic and transparent analysis by supporting the categorization of data segments, visualization of emerging patterns, and development of coherent themes that reflect participants' perspectives on the role of education and experience in political leadership.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Education plays a crucial role in developing human capital for political leadership, providing foundational knowledge and enhancing leadership skills. However, informants from Iraq emphasized that practical experience is equally important in selecting ministers, offering insights and skills beyond academic learning. A balanced approach to ministerial selection is favored, where both education and professional experience are valued to ensure effective governance. This highlights the need for criteria that equally prioritize academic qualifications and hands-on experience in political leadership roles.

Theme 1: Education as human capital development for political leadership

Educational background plays an important, yet often debated, role in ministerial and political appointments. While academic qualifications are seen as beneficial for providing theoretical knowledge and a solid foundation, they are not always considered essential. The perspectives gathered from various informants reflect a wide range of views on whether higher education degrees, such as a bachelor's, master's, or PhD, should be mandatory for political leadership.

One informant pointed out that while it might be ideal for politicians to hold advanced degrees, this is not always the case in practice. For example, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, despite not holding a master's or PhD, has successfully led his country:

"While it might be ideal for politicians to have specialized degrees, such as a master's at the very least, the reality is different... This raises the question: Is a formal degree necessary? In my view, the degree is not the most important factor" (B1).

However, the informant also suggested that, at a minimum, politicians should have a bachelor's degree, recognizing the value of formal education in political leadership:

"I believe the minimum requirement should be a bachelor's degree" (B1).

Another informant argued that while a formal academic qualification is not strictly required, it is preferable. Nevertheless, they stressed that practical experience should accompany academic knowledge for a well-rounded political career:

"It is not a requirement for a politician to hold an academic qualification, but it is preferable. However, an academic qualification alone should not suffice; it must be paired with practical experience in the field of politics" (C1).

In roles involving legal or legislative work, an academic qualification may become more important, as noted by one informant who emphasized that such roles benefit from specialized academic knowledge:

"If the role involves legal legislation, it is better for the politician to hold an advanced academic qualification" (D1).

An informant highlighted that possessing academic qualifications ensures that politicians have the necessary tools and knowledge for political work, providing a practical advantage by grounding their experience in solid theoretical foundations:

"Academic qualification is also a practical one, as it means that the politician possesses the tools and knowledge necessary for political work. This ensures that their practical experience is based on a solid foundation of knowledge" (A4).

Another perspective indicated that in certain ministries, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, an academic qualification is essential, as it aligns with the role's specific demands and responsibilities:

"It is unreasonable for someone to head a ministry like Higher Education without having an academic qualification or relevant experience" (A1).

While advanced degrees are often seen as enhancing a politician's ability to think critically and solve complex problems, the debate continues over whether they are truly necessary for success:

"A politician should hold advanced degrees, such as a master's or PhD. A person with higher degrees tends to have deeper thinking and a broader understanding compared to someone with only a bachelor's degree or less" (A5).

Ultimately, the consensus among informants leans towards the idea that while academic qualifications are beneficial, particularly in technical or legislative roles, they must be balanced with

practical experience. For specialized roles, such as those in technical ministries, advanced academic competence is considered essential:

"Yes, some technical ministries require politicians to have a high level of academic competence to enhance their chances of success in those roles" (A3),

"A specialized academic degree is essential and important in institutional political work (executive, judicial, and legislative branches), especially when coupled with experience" (A2).

While educational qualifications play a valuable role in shaping political leaders' theoretical understanding and problem-solving skills, they are not universally seen as a decisive factor. A consensus emerges that a balance between academic knowledge and practical political experience is crucial for effective leadership. Academic qualifications, particularly advanced degrees, are beneficial in technical or specialized roles, but they must be combined with on-the-ground experience to navigate the complexities of political leadership effectively. This dual emphasis on education and experience ensures that leaders are both well-informed and capable of making sound, strategic decisions in real-world situations.

Theme 2: Professional experience

Professional experience is crucial for leadership in political and ministerial positions, as it provides the practical skills and knowledge required to effectively manage complex governmental functions. Many informants emphasized the importance of experience in enabling individuals to make sound decisions and execute their duties efficiently.

One informant highlighted that the required years of experience can vary significantly depending on the role. Different positions within various sectors demand different levels of expertise, stressing that experience is relative to the responsibilities associated with a given role:

"The required years of experience will vary according to the administrative and professional hierarchy of the institution. For instance, the experience required of a cybersecurity manager differs from that needed for the editor-in-chief of reputable scientific journals. Thus, the number of years of experience is relative, depending on the nature of the specialization or sector the individual aims to lead" (B1).

The importance of experience in political work was also emphasized, with one informant noting that experience often outweighs academic qualifications in areas like management and decision-making:

"Practical experience is an extremely important factor in political work. In fact, I believe that experience sometimes outweighs academic qualifications, especially in fields like management and decision-making" (D1).

When it comes to high-ranking positions such as ministers and general directors, experience becomes indispensable. Several informants suggested a minimum of 10 years of experience is necessary for such roles:

"A general director must have at least 10 years of experience, and a department head should have 5 years" (C1),

"The Ministry of Higher Education Law requires that anyone assuming the position of General Director must have no less than 10 years of experience. The same applies to the position of minister" (B1).

One informant stressed that 10 years of experience is essential for high-ranking officials to effectively manage their roles:

"I believe that 10 years of experience are necessary before any politician takes charge of a ministry or any high-ranking position to ensure their ability to manage effectively" (B4).

Others provided a broader perspective, with some advocating for even more extensive experience for ministers, ranging from 15 to 30 years. One informant pointed out that such experience allows for the development of professional maturity and better planning:

"For high-ranking positions, like that of a minister, I believe 15 to 20 years of experience is necessary, while lower positions may require at least 5 years of experience" (A1),

"A politician should not hold any significant political position unless they have at least 30 years of practical experience. This period provides them with professional maturity and helps them develop better plans and policies" (A1).

In the context of the Ministry of Higher Education, it was suggested that experience in the education field is crucial for effectively managing the ministry's work:

"The Minister of Higher Education should have extensive experience spanning years in the field of education, such as having held the position of university dean for ten years, to be thoroughly familiar with the ministry's details and responsibilities" (A2).

"Any official or minister should have at least 10 years of experience before assuming a ministerial role, ensuring that they have gained the necessary experience through progression in various positions" (A3).

One informant emphasized that the lack of experience in political positions can lead to risky decision-making, underscoring the importance of practical experience:

"A politician who lacks experience can be risky in office, and giving them trust without confirming their experience could lead to poorly thought-out decisions" (A5).

Legally, experience is also a formal requirement in Iraq, where individuals assuming government positions must have at least 10 years of service or experience in their department:

"Legally, anyone assuming a government position must have more than 10 years of service or experience in their department. This law applies to politicians and those holding ministerial positions as well" (D1).

One informant noted that setting a specific duration of experience, such as 10 years, is crucial for ensuring that officials have the necessary skills to address complex issues effectively:

"Setting a specific period, such as 10 years, could be an appropriate duration for holding a ministerial position, as it allows enough time to gain sufficient experience to address complex issues effectively" (A4).

Many informants recognized that practical experience is sometimes as valuable as an advanced degree. One remarked that 15 years of experience could be considered equivalent to formal qualifications:

"I emphasize that long practical experience, which may span 15 years or more, can sometimes be equivalent to an advanced degree" (A1).

Finally, the technocratic phase under Prime Minister Al-Abadi in Iraq was cited as an example where the lack of understanding of parliamentary work resulted in the failure of ministerial appointments, illustrating the importance of sector-specific experience:

"I recall the technocratic phase under Prime Minister Al-Abadi, where many ministerial figures were appointed but failed in their duties because they lacked an understanding of parliamentary work in Iraq" (A5).

In conclusion, the consensus among informants is clear: professional experience is an indispensable criterion for ministerial and high-ranking positions. The necessary experience, whether it be 10, 15,

or 30 years, provides individuals with the maturity, sector-specific knowledge, and decision-making skills required to effectively lead government institutions. Failing to prioritize experience can result in poorly executed policies and governance.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of ministerial appointments in Iraq underscores the critical need for a balanced approach that integrates both academic qualifications and practical experience. While education equips ministers with theoretical insights and problem-solving skills, it must be complemented by substantial hands-on experience—ideally a minimum of 10 years within the ministry. Such experience ensures ministers acquire sector-specific expertise, an understanding of administrative processes, and the decision-making acumen necessary for effective leadership. The findings emphasize that prioritizing both education and practical experience is essential for developing mature, capable governance and reducing inefficiencies in government leadership and policymaking.

This study is significant as it provides a thorough evaluation of the interplay between education and experience in Iraq's ministerial appointments, offering evidence-based recommendations to improve leadership competence and integrity. It highlights deficiencies in current practices, reinforcing that both academic training and practical exposure are indispensable for effective governance. However, the study's limitations—such as a small sample size and potential participant selection bias—may affect the broader applicability of its findings.

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