



## Iraqi elections: Sadrism electoral “victory over pro-Iranian militias” amid a legitimacy crisis and a fragile socio-economic environment

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*The Iraqi parliamentary elections were held early in response to the 2019 mass protests. The final results have yet to be announced; yet, it appears that the Sadrism movement is the big winner while pro-Iranian militias seem to have suffered the greatest loss. Considering though the lowest voter turnout since Saddam Hussein’s removal in 2003, the very democratic legitimacy of the new government, whose formation process is expected to be lengthy and complex, is under question. Additionally, its fragility is highlighted in the gravity of the challenges it faces: serious socio-economic problems related to the Covid-19, climate change and entrenched corruption.*

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The Iraqi parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for April 2022, were held early in response to the Tishreen protests (named after the Arabic word for 'October') which erupted across Baghdad and southern provinces in October 2019, against corruption, unemployment, poor services and foreign interference. The October 10, 2021 election was held under the new electoral law whose drafting was a protesters' key demand and was ratified by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November 2020. The new law aims, inter alia, at enabling the independent candidates' gain of seats in the 329-member Parliament by increasing the electoral districts from 18 to 83.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the voter turnout at the fifth election since the 2003 US-led invasion has been the lowest on record questioning therefore the legitimacy of the result.

The Sairoon alliance, led by Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who had withdrawn its electoral participation in July 2021 before reversing it one month later, seems to be the biggest winner with an increase of its seats so far from 54 to 73. By contrast, its direct competitor, the Fateh Alliance, a coalition of Iranian-backed militias and led by Hadi al-Amiri, has suffered a strong decline by losing more than half of its 2018 seats. Fateh has not been able to capitalize again on its militias' military popularity and gains against ISIS - as it did in the 2018 elections- mainly owing to its militias' involvement in the lethal crackdown on the protesters in 2019 - more than 700 protestors were killed and nearly 10,000 were injured- and the growing anti-Iran sentiment. Still, Renad Mansour's reminder that the pro-Iranian militias may have lost their political but not coercive power is important to keep in mind.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Sadrist movement's success has gone hand in hand with its rhetoric against militias and foreign interference as well as its quiet and gradual domination of the apparatus of the Iraqi state over the past two years. In support of his pre-electoral rhetoric, Sadr called his party's victory as "a victory over militias" while he stated that "arms will be limited to sole state control" during his victory televised speech on October 11, 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Nouri al-Maliki, State of Law Coalition's leader and historical ally of the parties affiliated with pro-Iranian militias, made an impressive comeback by securing 35 seats and therefore becoming the second largest Shi'a block. As for the Sunni bloc, the Taqaddum party led by the parliamentary speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi won about 40 seats, mainly in Sunni-majority regions. That puts Taqaddum in the second place in terms of seats providing Sunni with its strongest leverage since Saddam Hussein's fall. From a societal perspective, analyst Yesar al-Maleki sees in the divide between the khariz (outside, diaspora) and the dakhil (inside) political figures an important factor contributing to Sadr's and al-Halbousi's Shi'a and Sunni vote winning respectively. In particular, he argues that the frustration of Iraqis vis-à-vis the khariz figures, seen as historically detached from Iraq's 1990s dynamics, has been key in shaping electoral results.<sup>4</sup>

Two noteworthy outcomes of the elections concern the newcomers' and independents' rise, as well as women's record seat. Indeed, although the Tishreen movement was far from being homogeneous and its activists were divided over whether to back protest-affiliated parties or to boycott the elections, the Imtidad ("Reach") Movement, one of the parties born out of 2019 Tishreen activists, seems to have done remarkably well gaining 10 seats. The new electoral law appears to have also partly benefited parties like Tasmim and Ishraqat Kanoun as well as independents who gained seats.<sup>5</sup> However, the climate of fear caused by potential election candidates', journalists' and activists' assassinations coupled with their short financial resources deprived the opposition from representation and viable campaign.<sup>6</sup> As for the women – 15 per cent of whom run as independents - they managed to surpass the allocated 25 per cent quota for female candidates (translating into 83 seats) by gaining a record 97 seats.<sup>7</sup>

## Kurdistan Region

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), with the exception of Duhok province, the turnout was similar to that in the rest of Iraq suggesting therefore that Kurdish parties are also confronted with people mistrust. Nevertheless, the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) seems to have increased its seats. Interestingly, the KDP won all three seats in the electoral zone of Sinjar where Yazidis - including those in the IDP camps in Duhok – voted, while the pro-PKK PADÊ's results were poor therein; still the turnout was the lowest among Nineveh province's electoral zones. Kurdish parties saw their seats grow by 6 seats, from 14 in 2018 to 20, in the disputed territories of north & central Iraq. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which had formed a coalition with Gorran (Change), witnessed a slight seat decrease, partially due to the infighting over its leadership which culminated in Lahur Sheikh Jangi's ousting by Bafel Talabani from the party's co-leadership. In addition, the turnout in its stronghold of Sulaymaniyah was among the lowest countrywide. Surprisingly, with 5 more seats, in total 9, the New Generation – the only party which had openly opposed the 2017 independence referendum – might pose a potential threat to the two ruling parties, KDP and PUK. Lastly, neither Gorran, nor the PKK-backed Kurdish Azadî movement (Tevgera Azadî) manage to secure any seat for their candidates. Overall, as the KDP seems to have strengthened its position in the KRI, it might now seek the Iraqi presidency, which has been held since 2005 by the PUK.<sup>8</sup>

## Regional Perspectives

The October 10 elections and the formation of the new government are not only of concern to the Iraqis but also to the regional states, as well as to the US. Iran and Iraq's Arab neighbors, mainly Saudi Arabia, are closely watching. Tehran is struggling to ensure its political and military clout in Iraq amid a growing anti-Iranian sentiment. The latter has been evident especially in the South, as in Basra protests in the summer of 2018, and among the youth during the Tishreen uprising in October 2019. In turn, amidst Iranian-Saudi talks, Riyadh seeks to increase its involvement in Baghdad to Iran's detriment. In light of the forthcoming withdrawal of its military forces by the end of 2021, the US are also watching, closely but careful not to be viewed as interfering. As for Turkey, it should be pleased with the results given its implication in Iraq, crystalized in its multilayered cooperation with the KDP in the Kurdistan Region as well as in its ties with the Sunni bloc. The latter has been highlighted by Erdogan's meetings with al-Halbousi and Khamis al-Khanjar, Azm Alliance's leader, one week prior to the Iraqi elections. As for the KDP's electoral gains, Ankara might project them as legitimization of its military operations in northern Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup>

## Challenges

Despite his victory, Sadr must now negotiate with his opponents to forge a new government, the process thereof is expected to be lengthy and thorny given Sadr's lack of majority. His subsequent intention to talk with Taqaddum and the KDP for a potential coalition would threaten al-Maliki's and Fateh's interests. However, should the majority required not be achieved, other partners will be necessary to negotiate with in order to form the next government. Threats by parties, such as Fateh and Kata'ib Hezbollah, that they would reject the results further undermine the already fragile atmosphere and pose a risk of renewed violence, especially if they consider that their sway is declining.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, such deteriorating security and governance conditions could reignite renewed mass protests considering in addition the existing socio-economic grievances alongside the legitimacy crisis linked to the low turnout.

With respect to the turnout, a resounding message sent mainly by young Iraqis is that electoral law reforms and assurances of fairness and transparency alone cannot alleviate people's growing grievances and anger. As long as their demands of ending corruption, creating jobs, providing basic services and holding armed groups accountable remain unaddressed, it seems that for the youth, which

constitutes the vast majority of the country, with a median age of 21 years old, protests and pressure from the outside might constitute a rather effective form of politics to engage in. Besides, their voice has been heard – albeit being met with unprecedented brutality – and some of their core demands were only met once they decided to remain in the streets during the Tishreen protests in 2019. Moreover, the low voter turnout echoes the findings of a recent public opinion research conducted by the National Democratic Institute which suggest that 86 per cent of Iraqis view the protests, and not elections, as the best means to bring about change.<sup>11</sup>

Last but not least, Iraqi new government will be soon additionally confronted to a series of serious socio-economic problems related to and aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact, inter alia, on oil international demands, as well by the climate change and its multifaceted ramifications. With its own population and energy consumption growing and prolonged draught and temperatures reaching to some areas 50°C, Iraq has already faced serious energy challenges. Furthermore, given its high dependency on water and electricity supplies by Iran and the Euphrates-Tigris river system, Iraq's vulnerability was exacerbated by both the water policies in Turkey and Syria and Iran's reduction and halting of gas flow and electricity supply respectively in order to meet its own energy requirements. If the new government does not drastically address these energy-related issues, which in fact demand collective regional agency, it seems that it is a matter of time before new protests erupt, as it happened in July 2021 in the southern provinces.<sup>12</sup>

*Note: The article is written according to the so far preliminary results; as the counting is ongoing, results are subject to change.*

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