



Iraq's elections: Why Muqatada al-Sadr's win heralds a new era for Baghdad

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On 12 May, 2018 Iraq saw its first elections since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 that witnessed Iraqi voters' breakaway from the narrow, monolithic ethno-sectarian blocs that have characterized previous government-formation cycles in the past. The vote has assured that despite being a state still reeling from the effects of ISIS stronghold not too long ago, populist democracy may be replacing sectarianism as the defining force in Iraqi politics.

In this election, many voters abandoned their traditional divisions and supported two new political movements groups that promised to deliver the stability of a democratic administration that Iraqis have long hoped for; a corruption-free government with a strong national mandate run by a victor with a clear, nationalist agenda.

The Sairoon Alliance of populist Shia leader and firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr won Iraq's parliamentary elections in a remarkable comeback after being sidelined for years by his Iranian-backed rivals. Sadr's win has not just upset the electoral history of identity politics but he has also dismantled the confidence of pro-Iran and pro-US hopefuls in the country. A fierce opponent of the Iraq War and the US, he'll definitely be demanding the withdrawal of American troops. US foreign policy has lost massively in Iraq and will lose by extension in Syria.

With over 91 percent of votes counted in 16 of Iraq's 18 provinces, Iran-backed Shia militia chief Hadi al-Amiri's Fatah (Conquest) Coalition was in second place, while Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr (Victory) Coalition once seen as the frontrunner, came in third.

Many in Iraq however believe that despite Sadr's win, the 2018 election has deepened the country's political fractures.

Intra-community factionalism emerged as the overarching theme of the elections, with Shia, Sunni and Kurdish houses all internally divided and competing for votes.

The winner, Muqtada al-Sadr, has about 55 of the 329 seats in Parliament. While Sadr's 54 seats translate into only 16.4

percent of the seats in the new parliament, Iraqi politics are now so fragmented that the importance of his share is significantly amplified.

In order to form a government, at least four of the major blocks will need to coalesce, but without a clear mandate or agenda, parties will resort to old practices of buying off on government positions and doling out patronage to their supporters.

With Sadr's decisive albeit narrow win in the parliamentary elections, the challenge of forming a government now awaits, and with it indications about Iraq's future and the prospects for demanded reforms.

However, for the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, non-sectarian nationalism has played an important role in the balance of votes. All dominant political parties ran on a pledge of "Iraq First" — a rebuke to the outside powers many blame for recent instability, namely Iran and the United States.

Before the elections too, political pundits placed their bets on the country's Shia power-brokers who were to continue to dominate Iraq after 2018. With Iraq's Kurdish leaders largely focused on securing their own legitimacy in the aftermath of the disastrous independence bid in September last year that led to the autonomous region losing out on key regions and Iraq's Sunnis in the absence of a strong, well-established political party to have any real leverage in Baghdad, the Shiite factions in Iraq were poised from the start to fare better than the rest.

But in a stunning display of diverse visions of statehood even within the Shiite factions, all three main political groups presented broadly different election agendas, pushing for strong institutions and strengthening the state-security system. All three laid claim for the liberation of Mosul from ISIS.

The decisive difference between Sadr and former premier Nouri al-Maliki or PM Haider al-Abadi however lay within the latter's open rebuke to any associations with Iran — a radical

stance given that the Iran's heavy handedness manifested through its Popular Mobilization forces has been a consistent and a defining feature in both regimes of Sadr's predecessors.

An observatory glance at national voter turnouts has shown that any number of 'reformed' political manifestos made little difference to the common Iraqi man. The general mood before the elections was one of disillusionment. Media outlets reported that with over 90% of the same electoral lists and coalitions vying for seats and promising reform, it was this idea of seeing the same corrupt faces re-elected that led to most Iraqis decisions of boycotting the vote entirely

In fact, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's pre-election statement gave a furtive nod to voters who looked to disassociate with the political process entirely - "He who has tried should not try." This message in contrast to his 2005 election message where he urged all citizens to vote as a matter of 'duty' played to the air of protest that the widespread 'reform' movement of 2015 had triggered. The protests demanded the removal of political elites who had been entrenched in power since Saddam's fall in 2003 and had little to show in terms of actual reforms or action.

Perhaps due to this trust deficit prevalent in the general population, the turnout remained very low at only 44.5% — the lowest of all post-2003 elections. The low numbers are likely a sign of public anger at the entire political class, as people have grown sick of its constant failure to provide them with adequate services and political and economic reform.

Sadr's 'Sairoon' or 'On the Move' coalition drew its support from a loyal voter base and built upon the sentiments of the 2015 protest movement, so it was not affected by the low turnout, unlike other political parties. Sadr's opponents, particularly current Prime Minister Abadi and his predecessor as prime minister, Nour al-Maliki, were more affected by this boycott, despite their strong pre-election positing of their reformed political leadership, serious about change in Iraq.

Muqtada-al-Sadr– Reinvention from Iraq’s firebrand cleric to Kingmaker

Sadr’s victory - the Shiite cleric who undertook alliances with Communists, secularists and political independents in an unusual party construct - is a new turn in the political evolution of Iraq, one with far-reaching consequences not only for the country’s domestic fractured political groups but also for Iraq’s future relationship with neighboring Iran – and the United States. Sadr has firmly positioned himself as an Iraqi nationalist with his unprecedented alliances with fringe groups , vocally criticizing Iran’s outsized influence in Iraq; and strongly condemning the sectarian nature of Iraq’s politics.

Sadr’s legitimacy as a leader with no agenda for power or authority is predicated on the fact that Sadr did not himself contest the election, and so cannot have a formal role in the government—which seems to suit his preferences. Yet, Sairoon has run solely and squarely on the might of Sadr’s appeal which is attributed to his strong performance as a grassroots level leader, with a solid, loyal Shiite – and Sunni support base and Sadr’s uncanny ability like no other to attract crowds on the roads by the millions.

Since coming back from a self-imposed, three-year exile in Iran in 2011, Sadr has been at the forefront of attempts to change Iraq’s political system. Sadr’s lead in the 2018 elections has meant that he has been largely successful with the Iraqi population with his ‘reform’ rhetoric. Mr. Sadr’s coalition, Iraqi officials say, placed first in six provinces, including the densely populated capital, Baghdad.

In deconstructing Sadr’s success, Sadr's latest political maneuvering has demonstrated an increasingly hybrid model, that is not a solely religious network, political party, or militia, but a combination of these and more. He has deftly eclipsed paralyzing political binaries, by forming an alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party and a small array of independent, secular reformists.

Secondly, he has spurred an open discussion of the central problem of Iraqi politics: the “muhasasa” system - a post-2003 ethno-sectarian quota-based, ‘spoils’ system of sharing power which favors elites by divvying up ministries and government institutions via agreements between political factions

In coalition with his new partners, Sadr’s election trail was led on his call to support an entirely new group of technocratic candidates under a new name. He disbanded his existing “Ahrar” parliamentary bloc, with thirty-four members and ordered them all not to run for reelection, clearing the way for a new slate of technocrats—the vague term of choice for Sadr and his movement to describe the putative category of professional, independent experts who they believe could improve the Iraqi government’s performance, unfettered by sectarian or political allegiances.

Today, Sadr’s party is called “Istiqama,” which means “integrity,” and the overall coalition with the Communists and other smaller members is called “Sa’iroun,” which means “On the move,” or “Marching,” with the intention of evoking a march toward reform. The alliance’s goals are clear: a civil, secular state, run by technocratic experts who can fight corruption and improve governance.

To carve out a role for himself among these actors, Sadr began in 2003 to portray his Shia movement as an indigenous Iraqi nationalist and anti-US one, transcending the sectarian divide, and one that had developed from within the nation as opposed to the exiled Shia parties.

In 2004, he declared his solidarity with Arab Sunni insurgents besieged in Fallujah by United States forces, distancing from the exiled Iraqi Shia factions cooperating with the US. He sought to re-establish his Iraqi nationalist credentials in 2013, the beginning of his attempt to project himself as a leader of protest politics.

Sadr's embrace of the Sunni protesters then served as an attempt to distance himself from the sectarian bloodletting of the past, in addition to the entrenched Iraqi political elite. This

2013 strategy provides the continuity that explains his recent use of the politics of protest.

Unlike the Anbar protests of 2013, the August 2015 protests erupted in the capital Baghdad, Basra, and the Shia towns of Najaf, Karbala, and Hilla, over corruption in the government and incessant electricity cuts.

Nationally, Sadr has acted on his 'anti-elite', anti-establishment rhetoric, pioneering himself as a man of the people.

In 2012, for instance, Sadr worked with the then president of Iraq's Kurdish region Masoud Barzani, and former Prime Minister Allawi to push forward a no-confidence motion that came close to sacking PM Maliki, who was centralizing power as prime minister. Then, in 2016, Sadr joined the protest movement, leading demonstrators to infiltrate the Green Zone and the Iraqi Parliament, where he and his supporters staged an illegal sit-in. Ultimately, Sadr's actions forced Abadi to change his Cabinet and appoint a number of politically independent, technocratic ministers.

Sadr's agenda

Domestically, Sadr's positions have appealed to Iraqis who are weary of conflict but seek to maintain dignity and integrity in their foreign relations. For example, Sadr has softened his rhetoric about secularists, and has been willing to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and criticize Iran. But at the same time, he has maintained a hard line against the United States, whose influence in Iraq he considers wholly malign.

His style is to reflect the mood of protesters in the streets—a mood that has moved from anti-American during the U.S. occupation to anti-Iranian and generally anti-elite in more recent years.,

Before the election, Iran publicly stated it would not allow Sadr's bloc - an unlikely alliance of Shi'ites, communists and other secular groups - to govern.

While Mr. Sadr was once known for prolonged trips to Iran, he raised eyebrows less in 2017 with a rare visit to Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, where he met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and others.

Sadr, who last visited Saudi Arabia in 2006 attended "discussions of common interest" during his trip to Jeddah.

For his part, Sadr has made clear he is unwilling to compromise with Iran by forming a coalition with its main allies, Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr paramilitary group, and former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Sadr wants a carefully balanced foreign policy that keeps Iraq equidistant from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States.

Most notably, Sadr has been highly critical of American airstrikes in the country against the Islamic State, though he has said little recently about his willingness to allow American troops to remain on Iraqi soil. This could significantly complicate the American strategy in Iraq, which has involved complex intelligence sharing and training missions with former militias of ISIS.

Moreover, Iraqi analysts have stated that while it may be an overestimation to think that the leftists in Sadr's coalition would be the most helpful in promoting Russian-Iraqi ties, the prospect of Russia's military-technical cooperation especially in the light of the secular forces present in the coalition may increase the likelihood for strong foreign relations.

There is a reason Sadr's victory has caused a wave of concern in the West, particularly in Washington. Unlike his opponents on the ballot and previous heads of state in Iraq, Sadr's track record of strictly following through on his agenda has resonated among his base and there is little reason to see why

Sadr will not crack down on any foreign meddling forces in his Iraq.

Amongst other things, Sadr's track record has most notably included a call for fully integrating militias formed to fight the Islamic State into Iraqi government control and fighting off the stains of corruption and nepotism, which has massively manifested in Baghdad even in the wake of post-ISIS stability.

While Sadrist are not immune to the latter themselves, Sadr has in the past attempted to address the issue within his own ranks. For instance, in 2015, Sadr pressured Deputy Prime Minister Baha al-Araji, a member of his movement, to resign amid corruption allegations. Sadr's opponents in this month's election had not proven to many Iraqis that they had that kind of commitment.

As Iraqi political commentators have noted, in his four years in office, Abadi has failed to pursue anti-corruption measures, while Maliki's State of Law Coalition politicized anti-corruption campaigns by targeting Sunni and Kurdish opponents in Abadi's Cabinet, once again falling in the trap of coming across as playing on old adage politics.

Sadr recently in one of his populous election campaigns stated: "The existing political elite are part of the problem. They can't be part of the solution."

Although initial media hype has suggested that Sadr's victory was a landmark in Iraq's post-2003 politics, the prospects for genuine reform via elections remain remote.

Despite Sadr's reinvention as a coalition builder that may have enhanced his appeal, it does not mean that all of Iraq's leadership is ready to do business in a new way.

For one, Sairoon does not have many frontrunners for the prime minister's position, which has led to speculation that Sadr will allow for incumbent Haider al-Abadi to stay on. Regardless of

whether that happens, Sadr will likely turn his attention to how the office of the prime minister functions.

Two, history has proven that whenever a strongman has emerged in Iraqi politics, other political players seek ways to restrain his capabilities and Sadr despite the strong individualistic path he has forged for himself may not remain unaffected by this.

For one, this month's vote did not produce an outright winner with a majority in parliament. Instead, the top-three coalitions by votes—Sairoon, Ameri's Fateh Alliance and Abadi's Nasr Alliance—have an almost equal distribution of seats, giving each party considerable sway in negotiations to form the next government.

As a result, any coalition to emerge from political concessions will still ultimately lead to the diffusion of power across various elites.

According to Renad Mansour of the Carnegie Middle East Centre, Iraqis refer to this phenomenon as the "splitting of the cake," where each leader is handed posts to form the government, thus limiting the ability of one leader to enforce immediate changes to the system.

In the past, leaders have changed sides and withdrawn campaign promises in order to win positions, which helps explain the public's trust deficit in the election process. The low turn up of voters reflected this exact sense of public disillusionment and paranoia with the political process of the country – and this is a dangerous sentiment for the prospects of a long term democratic buildup of Iraq.

As Mansour puts it, the establishment parties that still hold power over state institutions, including many ministries, will not easily give up their claims even post-elections, jeopardizing the chances for reform led by Sadr alone.

There is no question that history has been made. Iraq's elections and particularly, Sadr's win of the majority of the

seats in Baghdad's politically fractured Parliament, has indeed been an indictment of Iraq's history of elitist policies.

But it remains to be seen as with many historic populist leaders in the past, whether Sadr can indeed deliver on his promise of systemic democratic change to the millions of Iraqis, who have been jaded before by unfulfilled promises of a legion of elected leaders.