

Longing for a Stable Government: The Challenges Facing the Incoming Prime Minister in Iraq after the Assassination of Suleimani

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Abstract: Iraq entered 2020 with a caretaker prime minister following his resignation after weeks of protests centred in the Shiite dominated south and the capital, Baghdad. However, the US assassination of Qasim Suleimani, Head of Iranian Quds Forces and Abu Mahdi Muhandis of Ketaeb Hezbollah, at Baghdad Airport in the early hours of January 3rd renders the question about what is next for Iraq more exigent. It took several months to reach a consensus on the formation of the government after the elections in May 2018 and, as expected, Prime Minister Adel Abdulmahdi was unable to serve more than a year. He had to resign in December 2019 after the protests demanding provision of basic services, an end to corruption and to the influence of foreign powers in the country. Despite the complicated situation of Iraq as it entered 2020, there were some hopes of a complete overhaul of the political system following the prime minister's resignation. But then came attacks on US and Ketaeb Hezbollah bases by Shiite militia, further attacks on the US embassy in Green Zone and finally the assassination of Suleimani by the USA. As a result, Iraq is more likely to continue being a battle ground between the USA and Iran in 2020.

The Iraqi protests which resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdulmahdi started at the end September 2019. Abdulmahdi secured confidence in his cabinet in October 2018 but the formation of the complete cabinet lingered in the parliament 8 months after. The choice of Abdulmahdi was considered as a compromise after the elections in May 2018 which had sparked long debates among different political groupings. At that time, several political commentators argued that his term would not last longer than a year since he did not have his own political bloc in parliament, and they have since been proven right. Many people interpreted the 2018 election results as a sign of the desperation felt by large segments of Iraqi society about sectarian politics. The political environment in Iraq post-2003 has been shaped by sectarian calculations and political bargains among different groups, delaying much needed solutions. The differences of opinion among several influential actors in the country has led to distrust towards state institutions and paved the way for the emergence of both militia and terrorist sub-state groups.

Prime Minister Abdulmahdi took post at a time when the country was devastated by IS and an anti-IS campaign, with the infrastructure of the country requiring huge amounts of investment simply to provide basic services for the Iraqi people. During the anti-IS campaign, several cities were bombed by the US-led coalition and Iraqi security forces, with Hasd al Shabi, part of the Iraqi state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) introducing harsh controls in these areas. For many people, the post-Saddam political system based on sectarian divisions did not bring the desired stability, political representation, public services etc. Instead, sectarian and ethnic divisions, rampant corruption, poor public services and unemployment have been the defining characteristics of the political atmosphere in Iraq in the last couple of years. Instead of having a functioning and democratic country, Iraqis witnessed continuous clashes between different armed groups and looting of the country's wealth.

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of the Iraqi society and resulted in big successes for them in the 2018 elections. Two Shia dominated political groupings were also successful in the elections, with both the Sadrist Sairoon group and the Fatah Alliance of Hadi al Ameri doing very well. The Fatah alliance formed a coalition with Maliki's State of Law and the Al-Binaa alliance to form the government; whereas Sairoon established contacts with several secular parties in the parliament.

Due to a difference of opinions over nominations for the post of prime minister between the two rival Shia groups, Sairoon and Binaa, Adel Abdulmahdi emerged as a compromise figure. He had served as a minister in several cabinets and as the vice-president in several governments in post-Saddam Iraq and is a renowned figure within the political circles. The son of a minister in Iraq's monarchy, Adel Abdulmahdi joined the Baath party but then switched to oppose Saddam Hussein, firstly as a communist and then as an Islamist. He rose to power based on an alliance of influential leaders of Shiite groups such as Hadi al Ameri and Moqtada Sadr. In addition to his good relations with Kurds, especially with Masoud Barzani, he had the blessings of the USA and Iran.

Although Abdulmahdi held the most powerful portfolio in the Iraqi political system, he lacked a political group of his own to support him in parliament. This meant that he had to consult with different political groups or wait for them to come to their own conclusions on the burning issues in Iraq. Even when he accepted the job of prime minister, he admitted that it was a heavy responsibility and he already had his resignation letter in his pocket. Following the removal of Saddam Hussein, the huge problems facing Iraq required dramatic action and swift responses to emerging crises. But Abdulmahdi's style of looking for consensus and political bargaining among different groups supporting his government, prevented him from taking any dramatic action, even during the protests which led to his downfall.

Bridging the differences between rival groups took a lot of time and ordinary Iraqis grew tired of endless political wrangling over control of the country's resources. Some of the daunting tasks facing Abdulmahdi's government were reviving the economy

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despite the low oil prices and integrating the PMF into Iraq's security system. He aimed to amalgamate the PMF and Peshmerga forces with the security structure of Iraq in order to eliminate alternative power centres within the country. Aware of the effectiveness of these armed groups, especially in the last elections, none of the political actors in Iraq were ready to voluntarily give away their militias. Some of these armed groups are in fact responsible for the death of the protestors which brought Abdulmahdi down.

Protests Ignited by a Lack of Services

In addition to the elimination of armed militia groups, which are outside the control of central government, another important task for Prime Minister Abdulmahdi was to curb the endemic corruption. According to Transparency International, Iraq is the 12th most corrupt country on earth.¹ Despite huge oil revenues, the country lacks basic services and must import electricity from Iran. Shortages of electricity and water in the south of the country, especially during the hot summers, led people to question their attachment to the government. Years of neglect in infrastructure is a common problem across the whole of Iraq. The only exception, to a certain degree, is the Kurdistan Regional Government, where a regional administration has invested some money in infrastructure projects and this part of the country was stable in the turmoil which engulfed post-Saddam Iraq.

Following the removal of Saddam, Shiite people felt that they had control of the Iraqi state and that their subordinate status of the Baath years would be reversed in the new political environment. Over the years, Shiite groups have had the ability to control the state apparatus in the country, but the rivalry among different Shiite actors has failed to change the lives of ordinary Iraqis since most of the money siphoned off from the state budget went into the pockets of political figures. One of the factors which triggered the 2019 protests was the Prime Minister's removal of Abdulwahab al Saadi; commander of the counterterrorism service and a popular figure because of his role in defeating IS and his stance against corruption. From the point of view of the protestors, if the national hero lost his job because of his efforts to fight corruption and the political class within his counter-terrorism service, then who could fight against corruption?

The protests which forced Prime Minister Abdulmahdi to resign mostly took place in the capital Baghdad and southern governorates, which are predominantly Shiite populated. Although youth from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds joined protests in Baghdad, there were large-scale protests witnessed in Sunni dominated governorates or Kurdistan Regional Government. Any protests in the Sunni dominated regions would be interpreted as an act of re-emergence of IS

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and would have discredited these protests from the very beginning. The protests in the Shia dominated south, against a Shia controlled government, signified the level of disillusionment in society of a sectarian-based system and poor services provided by the state. It may take years, but the unity of Iraq requires a political environment which forces political parties to appeal to different segments of the Iraqi society with programs based on provision of services.

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The bulk of protestors in the south of the country were young, educated but mostly unemployed Shiite groups with less attachment to the religious institutions. The composition of the protestors and the messages of the people that joined them signalled the changing priorities of Iraqi society. The divergence of expectations and priorities between the ordinary people and the political elite of the country may result in the elimination of some political figures and the emergence of others in the coming elections.

Reactions to Foreign Interventions

The protests against the sectarian-based political system were not only directed at the political establishment of Iraq, but also the Iranian support behind several political groups. After the defeat of IS, Iranian backed political groups and their armed militias had the upper hand in Iraq with a legitimacy earned from their fight against IS. Given their influence in Iraq in political and economic terms, Iran and Iranian backed groups are being held responsible for problems in the country. The Iranian consulate in Najaf was set on fire several times and some protestors lost their lives during the protests.³ News about the death of several protestors by armed and masked men increased suspicions about involvement of the foreign elements in these killings.

The harsh response to the protests and the killing and wounding of several protestors by the police forces and masked combatants led to an escalation of events. The main reason for the

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harsh response of the police, army and militia groups was the feeling of some political figures that these protests posed existential threats to them, since they believed their role was that of guardians of the existing system.⁴

The rivalry between the USA and Iran has also had direct consequences for Iraq evident in the delay in the formation of the government and the appointment of some ministers after the formation of the government. The attitude of the Iraqi government to US sanctions imposed on Iran, and Iraq's position on several regional issues are just some of the points fuelling the rivalry between the USA and Iran in Iraq. The US government's 'maximum pressure on Iran' campaign had a direct effect on Iraqi energy and trade relations with Iran. Iraqi officials must walk on a tight rope in terms of finding a balance between these two influential powers in their country.

Further examples include unidentified drones which targeted Iranian linked groups in 2019 and Shia groups which threatened to target the US presence in Iraq.⁵ At the end of 2019, the attacks on the US base in Kirkuk resulted in counter attacks from the US on several Iranian linked militia groups, Ketaeb Hezbollah, in Iraq and Syria. These drew criticism and calls for the respect of the sovereignty of Iraq from both US and Iranian officials.⁶ The events of the last days in 2019 and early in 2020 were shocking not

only to Iraqis, but also to people all around the world. Hashd al Shabi groups organized protests against the US attacks on Ketaeb positions in Iraq and large groups attacked the perimeters of the US embassy in Baghdad. The response of the US was shocking: the assassination of Suleimani and al Muhandis.

Challenges for the Incoming Prime Minister

During the protests that took place before the last elections in Iraq, especially in late 2016, protestors stormed the parliament and the then Prime Minister, Abadi, promised reforms. However, the concessions of the government were considered cosmetic in nature, therefore demonstrators in recent protests were demanding for fundamental change in the political system.⁷

There was hope of rebuilding the country and restructuring the society after the defeat of IS and the elections in 2018 but Abdulmahdi's government faced stark challenges; the delay in the its formation, the appointment of some of the ministers even several months after the formation of the government, the differences between Baghdad and Erbil on issues of budget, security and disputed territories, the failure to deliver even basic services, widespread unemployment and rampant corruption. Essentially, Abdulmahdi's failure to overcome these challenges is what brought him down.

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The challenges facing Iraq after the resignation of Abdelmahdi are multiple: first of all, there are constitutional and legal difficulties in terms of appointing the new prime minister and formation of the government. Constitutional limitations are already being overlooked. Competing legal arguments about the roles of political figures, parliament and judiciary will dominate the agenda of Iraq for some time to come. Political figures may seek the support of legal bodies in their struggles with opponents, but the judiciary is unlikely to be enthusiastic about taking sides in such a divisive political environment.

Besides these legal issues, another factor which affects government formation is foreign influence. This has been the case since 2003 with neighbouring countries having had their stakes in the Iraqi government, but the interests of the USA and Iran have been the most influential. In the formation of the incoming government, Iran's priority will be retaining its existing influence over Iraqi politics, whereas the USA will aim to limit Iranian influence by benefitting from the anti-Iranian protests in Iraq. Iran will aim to benefit from its influence in Iraq as defence against the USA, meanwhile the USA will aim to limit and curtail Iranian influence in Iraq with its maximum pressure campaign. With the latest escalation in tensions having resulted in the assassination of Suleimani, this rivalry will lead to more instability in Iraq for some time to come.

In the past couple of years, the Shiite cleric Sistani has had an impact on the nomination of political figures for the top Iraqi jobs because of his influence on the Shiite community. In addition to him, US and Iranian political influence has also played an important role in these appointments. With the latest protests, however, the protestors themselves have become one of the most influential players in political bargaining since they do not completely obey the messages of Sistani and reject impositions by different political groups in Iraq. This can be seen with the latest proposal by the Binaa group to appoint Asaad al-Eidani to the post of Basra governor, which has been rejected by protestors. Until today, protestors remained determined to defend their sacrifices for a change in political system. Hence, in addition to the competition between different political groups, influence of prominent religious figures and competing interests of foreign powers, the demands of ordinary Iraqis taking to the streets need to be taken into account.

The incoming Prime Minister has lots of homework to finish in a short period. According to current discussions in Iraqi political circles, there will be an interim government for a year to prepare the country for early elections. Electoral law has been revised to make each governorate a district and there will be some other political and legal changes in attempts

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to answer some of the protestors demands. The first tasks of the next prime minister will include building trust in Iraq's institutions, making them transparent and responsive to the demands of ordinary Iraqis. This task is also connected to the need to fight corruption. What we have witnessed in Iraq is the institutionalization of corruption and overcoming this culture of corruption within state institutions and among political figures will require harsh measures. Some observers in Iraq believe that fighting corruption in the country requires work more akin to a butcher than a surgeon, and whilst such a remark might be an exaggeration, it shows the perception within society towards the elite in the country.

Building trust in the institutions will not only help fight corruption but also contribute to the efforts of providing basic services to the people. After years of internal strife, sectarian conflicts and bloodshed, the Iraqi people are fed up with the old elite and their style of politics. Instead of ideological programs, protestors were calling out for services and employment opportunities. Answering the rapidly increasing populations' demands for better government, services and employment opportunities are difficult challenges to overcome for any incoming prime minister. However, given the tried and failed ideological and sectarian agendas of the post-Saddam era in Iraq, there seems to be little alternative.

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Whatever the outcome of this political debate in Iraq in terms of a new government, a new type of political approach is certainly needed to meet the demands of the Iraqi protestors. A responsive, transparent and stable government may provide some relief from the huge problems of this war-torn country, but with the latest escalation in Iraq, the prospects of a stable government focusing on services for ordinary citizens still seems far away. In the near future, Iraq will continue to be a battle ground between the USA and Iran with the USA increasing its presence in the region and Iran promising revenge for the assassination of Qasim Suleimani. Unfortunately, without a new government in Iraq and the de-escalation in the rivalry between the USA and Iran, there will be no quick solutions to the problems such as electricity and water supply or fighting corruption in Iraq.

Endnotes

- 1- <https://www.transparency.org/country/IRQ>
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