

IRAQ'S ELECTIONS: A VICIOUS CYCLE

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ABSTRACT: This piece considers whether an early election in Iraq will lead to change, or merely reinforce the status quo and current power structure. Considering the key challenges confronting Iraq's democratic process and genuine popular participation across the country, this piece highlights the ongoing and polarizing public debate in Iraq regarding whether early elections will take place on the planned date of October 10, or their possible postponement to 2022. However, this debate bears no effect on whether or not these elections will make any actual difference in the political process. This piece argues that rather than being a vehicle for political change and reform, an early election will likely only serve to legitimize Iraq's political dysfunction and the existing status quo.

Introduction

In January 2021, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi called for early parliamentary elections, to be held on October 10 of this year. Al-Kadhimi came to office in May 2020, replacing Adel Abdul Mahdi who resigned amid a bloody crackdown against protesters who demanded his ousting and many other political changes. Since October 2019, mass demonstrations, known as the "Tishreen Revolution," started in Baghdad and other Shia-majority provinces in central and southern Iraq. Protesters demanded an end to corruption, better living conditions, independence from regional and global powers such as Iran and the United States, and most importantly, the downfall of the political regime entrenched in Iraq since the 2003 US invasion.

The protests sent shockwaves through Iraq's political system, state-society relations, and even people's identities. They forced the Abdul Mahdi government to resign, and pressured Iraq's major political players, specifically within the Shia community, to nominate a prime minister who was endorsed by the street.¹ The decision to hold early elections in Iraq was one of the 2019 October protest movement's demands, and a promise made by Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's government. Calls for early elections were part of a sweeping demands for changes to Iraq's political process towards legitimacy, functionality and inclusivity. The new government therefore was formed on two key promises: to prepare the country for early elections, and bring to justice the murderers of hundreds of young protesters killed during the protests.²

However, eighteen months on from the formation of the current government, no one has been held accountable for the killing of protesters, journalists and activists, and the political environment is anything but ideal for elections. There is currently a heated debate in Iraq around whether these early elections will take place on the planned date, or will be further postponed to 2022. The real debate, however, should be about whether these elections will make any difference or not.

With less than four months to go to the planned date, tensions are high between the government and factions of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces), which have been accused of carrying out repeated attacks on protesters, activists, as well as military bases of US-led international coalition present in Iraq. These activities have raised questions about the Iraqi government's ability to organize fair elections free from fear and security concerns. Given the current climate of political uncertainty and insecurity, early elections may not only fall short of protesters' demands but may even further threaten to reinforce the very system rejected by protesters. Instead of being a vehicle for political change and reform, elections would only serve to legitimize the status quo and political dysfunction in Iraq.

While the protesters of 2019 were able to exert some influence over the players, they have been so far powerless to change the rules of the game: informal ethno-sectarian power-sharing. 276 parties have been registered to participate in the early elections, and 44 new alliances have been approved.³ However, major political parties and alliances are expected to dominate the election results – the Sadr Movement, al-Fatih, al-Hikma, State of Law and al-Nasr among the Shia community; the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) among Kurds; and Azim and al-Taqaddum coalitions among Sunni Arabs – are all largely built on ethno-sectarian foundations, which constrain the genuine popular movement to cross-ethno sectarian participation in the democratic process.

Similar to the 2018 parliamentary elections, no single party or coalition is expected to win an overwhelming majority within the three largest components of Iraqi society: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. The fact that none can claim to speak on behalf of their communities makes cross-ethno sectarian political understandings or coalitions a necessity already apparent in the unfolding Sadrist-KDP-al-Halbousi and Fatih-PUK political alliances. However, such collaborations are not intended to change Iraq's informal power-sharing system in which the prime minister's post is reserved for a member of the Shia community, the speaker of parliament to the Sunnis, and Iraq's president to the Kurds. It is against this rigid and divisive system that young Iraqis took to the streets to protest in 2019.

Elections, if they occur on the planned date, will take place in an environment deeply uncondusive to the wishes of the protesters who were first to demand the early elections. Below is a sketch of the key challenges confronting Iraq's democratic process and the protesters' demands.

Protesters' Lack of Political Organization

The October 2019 protest movement challenged the traditional power structure, especially within the Shia community, by dispersing power and creating another actor: the street. Despite this, Iraq's mainly young protesters have been unable to establish a strong organization to compete in the elections and thus change their outcomes.

Among the protesters, there has been a desire to transform their activism and protest movement into an effectual political movement and force. To this end, several meetings were organized and channels established between protest leaders across Baghdad and other Shia-majority provinces of Nasiriya, Karbala, Basra and Muthanna. There were common grounds to establish a political organization, as most of the protest leaders were from the south, representing lower middle and working-class Shia. These commonalities initially helped make the protest movement coherent and consistent. However, early elections have created an obvious fragmentation in this tenuous allyship. For example, the Imtidad movement in Nasiriya led by Alaa al-Rikabi, a pillar of the protests, announced it would run in the elections; the National House (al-Bait al-Watani) led by Hussein al-Ghurabi, also from Nasiriya, announced its boycott of the elections. Similar situations apply to the rest of the emerging political movements that originated in the October 2019 protests.

The protest organizations today can be categorized into three groups based on their attitudes towards elections and the movement's future. The first believe that entering the political process enhances the chances of achieving the demonstrators' democratic and peaceful demands; therefore, the leaders of this group view elections as an opportunity to bring about change.

The second category, a dominant group within the protesters, believes that the political system suffers from a structural defect, and elections are not necessarily a solution to existing problems, but may rather produce counterproductive results and perpetuate crises. Hence, they consider the elections as an already lost cause which they seek to distance themselves from. This group further believes that any protest movement's participation in an election in which it is highly likely that it will not emerge as a major power will lead to the movement losing its most valuable lobbying cards. This group is likely to officially establish a coalition to call for a boycott of the next elections soon.⁴

A third group can be seen emerging mostly of demonstrators, represented by the Baghdad Students' Union which has coordinated student strikes and protests in universities. This group wishes to maintain the spirit and momentum of the protest movement alive by transforming it into a persistent pressure group and popular force on the streets.

It is important to note that political players in the establishment are pushing for the protest leaders to participate in the early elections. Specifically, there has been an understanding between several protest leaders and al-Kadhimi. However, the assassination in Karbala in May 2021 of prominent activist Ihab al-Wazni, a well-known leader in the popular movement who had declared his intentions to run in the upcoming elections, has invalidated all the guarantees that al-Kadhimi once provided to the protesters. Many of the “October” forces have been forced to withdraw from elections, pressured by the continued targeted killing of activists.

The Shia Community: A Fugitive Weapon

Between 2005 to 2018, major political decisions regarding the formation of governments, specifically the position of the prime minister were decided between three factions: the Dawa Party, the Sadr Movement, and the party of the clerical-political al-Hakim family. The results of the 2018 elections, in which the Sadr Movement (54 seats) and al-Fatih alliance (48 seats) emerged as clear victors, upended this equation. These two forces were critical in the formation of the Abdul Mahdi government in October 2018, as well as Al-Kadhimi’s government in May 2020. These two blocs are likely to remain the two most powerful actors, not only within the Shi’i community, but Iraq as a whole.⁵ In the upcoming election, the Sadr Movement is once again expected to have a major role in the appointment of the prime minister, either through appointing its own candidate, or else a representative from a bloc or alliance emerging after the elections with Muqtada al-Sadr.⁶ Al-Sadr cannot be excluded from the decision process, as his unique power and influence on the street in Shia-majority areas has the potential to destabilize any government in Baghdad. Equally, the al-Fatih alliance, which includes major Iranian-backed armed groups such as the Badr Organisation, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Sanad Movement, Sanad Bloc and Tashih Movement,⁷ cannot be excluded in the next government. It is predicted that the parliament will once again lack a clear partisan majority, meaning the next prime minister will once again be a consensus figure.

Another layer of power rivalry within the Shia establishment which may further reinforce the current status quo is the rivalry between two emerging groups of elites and factions within the community: technocrats or Shia nationalists, and the military elites. This contest can also be expressed as a rivalry between state and non-state actors. Most of the existing elites can be grouped into one of these two categories. For example, at a senior level, individuals including former prime minister Haider al-Abadi and the incumbent fall into the former group of elites, while Qais Khazali and other heads of

armed groups represent the latter non-state military elites and actors. Neither of these two groups are strong enough to completely triumph over the other. Rather, they mutually require one another to maintain what influence they do have. Technocrats must cooperate with the armed elites to maintain military control, while the armed elites need the technocrats to provide civilian governance.

The unsettling effect of the power rivalry between these two camps has contributed to instability within the Shia community, and by default, the Iraqi government. More importantly, this rivalry has saturated most of the spaces within Shia politics, leaving protesters with limited maneuvering space with which to influence the political system.

Within this context, the term “fugitive weapon”, or al-silah al munfalt, refers to the weapons in the hands of militias which threaten the safety of the population. This is specifically the case among the Shia community. A major precondition for the upcoming elections is to impose control over the weapons currently in the hands of armed groups. For elections to take place peacefully, a safe environment is required so that all parties may compete equally, and all citizens cast their votes freely.

The Sunni Community: Post-Daesh Transition and “Political Money”

From 2005 to present, the Sunni Arab political landscape has been characterized by volatility and the lack of stable political organizations. Since 2003, political formations have coalesced around leading charismatic figures whose power basis has stemmed from tribal networks and personal wealth. Three major alliances and blocs have emerged among Sunnis, most notably Azim led by Khamis al-Khanjar, the al-Taqaddum of the current parliamentary speaker Muhammad al-Halbousi, and the National Salvation Project led by Osama al-Nujaifi,⁸ all of whom seek to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Further barriers hindering people’s genuine participation is that elections held in Sunni-majority regions, such as Nineveh, Salahadin and Anbar, will still take place in a context characterized by the fear, destruction, displacement, and instability caused by Daesh and other armed groups, which have terrorized the communities. While the security environment in Sunni-majority provinces such as Nineveh and Anbar have improved considerably in comparison to the atmosphere of the 2018 elections, these regions are still in transition and in early stages of post-Daesh recovery and stabilization, with many still in displacement camps and other vulnerable settings, particularly in Nineveh.

A major concern in these regions is what is defined in Iraq as “political money,” or the use of money to buy posts and votes. This is quite evident among Sunnis, especially in areas “liberated” from Daesh.

The Kurds: KDP and PUK Power-Sharing

The informal power-sharing system in Iraq has granted the traditional Kurdish forces of the KDP and PUK considerable advantage since 2005, with their ability to nominate the post of president. PUK's recent alliance with the smaller Kurdish party Gorran (the Change Movement) has led to the subsequent formation of a Kurdistan Alliance to run in elections. Opposition parties, including the Islamic Union, New Generation and the Justice Group, have been unable to maintain the Kurdistan Hope Alliance, a non-KDP-PUK bloc in the Iraqi parliament,⁹ and will each run in the elections individually. KDP, the largest Kurdish party in Iraq, has announced its own electoral list.

A likely scenario resulting from this situation is that the KDP and PUK's Kurdistan Alliance will gain almost the same number of seats (25-28 seats for each), further reinforcing the traditional power-sharing system and duopoly in Kurdish politics. As a result, Iraqi Kurds, especially the youth, are losing hope in the possibility of a structural change in the elections.

What is next?

The ethno-sectarian nature of Iraq's key powers and alliances, combined with fragmented protest movements, makes a radical change unlikely. Given current circumstances, it is unlikely that an election and its results would satisfy protestors, but instead perpetuate the ongoing vicious cycle of political instability and crisis of legitimacy and representation. Unlike the other elections held in Iraq after 2005, the 2018 election was characterized by a record low turnout, with only 44 per cent of eligible voters casting their ballots. The negative consequences of people's non-participation already manifested in the 2019 protests, with many young people questioning the legitimacy of the entire political process. An even lower turnout in the next Iraqi elections is a highly likely scenario now with more organized activism and calls for a boycott. The boycott effort is driven by perceived absence of a strong alternative to the existing power structure, and a lack of trust that the elections will bring about structural change.

Endnotes

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