Iraq Elections: Iraqis Vote "Iraq First"?

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On May 12, 2018, Iraq held its fifth election since 2003. This was the first parliamentary election since the stabilization of the security environment following the victory against ISIS at the end of 2017. Approximately 12 million eligible voters turned out to vote for multiple political parties and roughly 8,000 nominees, in a quiet and almost taciturn manner. Overall voter turnout was 44.5 percent, 33 percent in Baghdad[1] – the lowest since the 2005 elections. Prior to the elections, many clerics and civil society activists called for eligible voters to boycott the election. It is estimated that around 20 percent of eligible voters abstained from voting, many likely heeding the boycott call. Prime Minister Haydar al-ʿAbadi, who lost potential votes due to this boycott, was its main victim. There were several reasons for the boycott, including widespread anger and corruption. However, the boycott did not directly target al-ʿAbadi, but rather, depicted the prime minister as a candidate unable to fix a broken Iraqi political system. There were also complaints made regarding the Iraqi electoral system, the Supervisory Authority, and the method by which votes were tallied; many Iraqis accused the system of working in favor of the large political parties.

In recent weeks, reports of electoral fraud, unprecedented in post 2003 Iraq, have cast a shadow over the results. Due to the change from manual to digital vote counting in this year's election, there are suspicions of fraud throughout the country. The newly appointed panel of judges in charge of the election commission announced it would only manually recount votes in the areas where there were fraud allegations. Ballot boxes from these areas will be transferred to Baghdad, and the recount will be held under United Nations supervision at a

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[1] Mustafa Habib, "Novelty Please: Iraq's Elections winner just Giving the People What They Wanted," *Niqash* May 17, 2018.

time and place that has yet to be determined.[2] The scope of the recount is still unclear and the specific areas that will have their ballots recounted have not been named. The outgoing parliament, whose term constitutionally expires at the end of June, voted for a full recount earlier in the month, but it is not clear whether their opinion will affect the panel of judges who are now in charge of the election commission and the more limited recount. The uncertainty surrounding the final results and the pending recount leaves Iraq in a state of limbo. Nevertheless, negotiations for the formation of a governing coalition continue on the basis of the initial election results. As of late June 2018, no coalition has been formed and no candidate for the post of prime minister has been announced.

The election results indicate deep divisions within Iraqi politics. The results delivered a victory to the "Saʾirun" ("on the march") pre-election alliance. This grouping represents an alignment between the "Sadrist Movement," led by Shiʿi cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, and the "al-Nasr" party (the "Victory Alliance"), spearheaded by incumbent Prime Minister and Western ally, Haydar al-ʿAbadi. Together, the two parties won 96 out of the 329 seats in the Council of Representatives of Iraq. Their main rivals were the "Fatah Alliance," headed by Hadi al-ʿAmeri, head of the Iraqi Shiʿi militias and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's "Dawlat al-Qanun" ("State of Law") party. These two parties received Iranian support and managed to win 73 seats.[3] As a result, the Iraqi political system has entered a period of negotiations to form a coalition government.

Muqtada al-Sadr and his party, comprised of a combination of traditional supporters from the poor Shiʿi factions and the Iraqi Communist Party, along with a number of other secular groups, won 54 seats in the Council of Representatives. The Saʾirun alliance won the largest number of seats in this election, though its gains are significantly lower than those achieved by other political parties in previous elections.[4] Voter turnout in Baghdad secured Sadr's victory, while there was a close race between the pro-Iranian, "Fatah Alliance," and Saʾirun in the rest of the predominantly Shiʿi provinces. This election proved, yet again, the significance of the Iraqi capital within the Iraqi political framework. From this and past election results, one can conclude that the candidate who wins Baghdad wins the election.

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[2] Ahmed Abouleinein, "Iraq plans manual election recount only for suspected ballots," *Reuters*, June 24, 2018.

[3] "Iraqi Elections Final Results: al-Sadr's Block Wins Parliamentary Poll," *Al Jazeera*, May 20, 2018.

[4] For the purpose of comparison, in the April 2014 elections, the winner, Nouri al-Maliki won 92 seats.

The Iraqi political system is ruled by parties dominated by members of the Iraqi Shi'i community. Differences between two rival blocs within Iraq's Shi'i community, the Sadr- 'Abadi group and the 'Ameri-Maliki coalition, have caused a deep split within the Shi'i population. The Sadr-'Abadi alliance is firmly against Iranian intervention in Iraq and emphasizes the need to disarm and integrate the Shi'i militias into the Iraqi state security forces. In particular, these calls are aimed at the *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Units), which were founded by thousands of mostly Shi'i volunteers to fight the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. This group emerged in response to calls by the Shi'i religious cleric, 'Ali Sistani, and were added to a large group of militias already in existence prior to the emergence of the IS threat, including: Badr, Hizballah al-Iraqi, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. These groups are staunchly opposed to the call to disarm.

The Sadr-'Abadi coalition is against Iraqi militias operating outside the borders of Iraq, among them the pro-Iranian militia, *al-Nujaba*, which has forces based in Syria. On the regional front, Sadr and 'Abadi have led a campaign to improve relations with the moderate Sunni states, most notably Saudi Arabia. Both leaders visited Saudi Arabia before the elections (Sadr also visited the UAE). This rapprochement is occurring due to shared interests between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Iraq needs Saudi funds to rebuild the Sunni dominated area within Iraq and is interested in diversifying its oil production by reopening the Saudi pipeline to the Red Sea. Both countries are also interested in cooperating to fight terrorism.

Yet, the Sadr camp is also known for its anti-American stance. Sadr and his militia, originally known as the Mahdi Army, battled U.S. army forces in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. The Trump administration's actions in the region – specifically its decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem rather than the administration's actions to confront the Iranian regime – triggered wide-scale anti-American protests by Sadr's followers in Baghdad. However, Sadr understands that his decision to improve ties with neighboring Sunni states comes with the price of maintaining the U.S. presence in Iraq. Sadr will not vehemently oppose a continued, though limited, U.S. military presence in Iraq, nor will he object to continuing American military assistance to the Iraqi army and security forces. However, Trump's actions are likely to determine the nature of future relations between the United States and Iraq. Should the U.S. avoid hostile actions or statements and show a restrained response to anti-American demonstrations in Baghdad, relations between the two countries will continue to prosper.

The first faction, the Sa'irun alliance – namely Sadr and 'Abadi – share a common vision for the future of the Iraqi state. Both leaders have declared a war on

corruption – ʿAbadi had previously reduced the economic privileges given to high-ranking politicians. The duo believe that the appointment system, based on a sectarian-based quota system ("Muhassasa"), is the major cause of corruption and political incompetence. They support building a "technocratic government," in which people would be appointed based on skill and merit rather sectarian or political affiliation. Sadr and ʿAbadi also support a centralized Iraqi government, controlled by Baghdad, and vigorously reject efforts to give Iraqi provinces federal status or expand Kurdish autonomy.

On the other hand, the ʿAmeri-Maliki bloc is dependent on Iranian support and Iraqi Shiʿi militias. Maliki is dependent on the power and prestige of the Shiʿi militias following their achievements in the war against the Islamic State, which according to the militias, is not over yet. These forces are substituting Shiʿi sectarian pride for ethnic Arab pride yet are also employing many young people and compensating the families of militia recruits. The militias still wield considerable coercive power on the Iraqi street: militia members hound civil society activists, send letters to their rivals threatening assassination, arrest opponents from all ethnic groups, and spread fear throughout the general public. The ʿAmeri-Maliki bloc does not have a shared, common vision for Iraq: it is a purely political alliance. The only common denominators amongst the various factions of this camp are a pro-Iranian posturing in regional politics and a common Shiʿi identity.

Outside of the Shiʿi camp, the divisions within the Sunni and Kurdish camps are much deeper and damaging. The majority of Iraqi Sunnis voted for a secular and Sunni sectarian party, *al-Wataniya*, paradoxically led by a Shiʿi, ʿAyad al-ʿAllawi. The remaining Sunni votes went to parties with a provincial base. In several Sunni provinces, as well as the Nineveh Governorate – the largest Sunni province in Iraq – ʿAbadi's Shiʿi party won many Sunni votes. Among the Kurdish population, the two major parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), won the largest number of seats. The former won 25 seats, and the latter secured 18. As of now, there is no unified Kurdish bloc in the Iraqi parliament (known as the Council of Representatives). However, it is expected that coalition negotiations will help bridge the divides within the Sunni and Kurdish camps, respectively. These parties are likely to form coalitions to represent their respective demands for joining the government.[5]

The Iraqi Council of Representatives experienced large turnover as a result of the May 2018 elections. The new parliament includes many new faces while many

[5] Karim ʿAbd Zaʾir, "al-ʿIraq: al-Ahzab al-Saghira Talʾab ʿala Ahbal Aqtab Tashkil al-Kutla al" (Iraq: Small Parties Play on the Strings of Forming a Bigger Block), *Azzaman*, May 27, 2018.

veteran politicians were defeated or did not stand for reelection.[6] The election results indicate that the Iraqi public punished corrupt politicians and rewarded those candidates perceived as untainted by the political system. These changes are also part of a sociopolitical process whereby the old generation of politicians and opposition members –who were in exile and returned to Iraq in 2003 after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein – is being replaced by a new generation of political leaders. The generation brought to power by the May elections is not only new, it is also young, unaccustomed to exile, and relatively new to politics– they were not politically active before 2003. Until the election results of May 2018, every Iraqi prime minister, head of a political party, and all high-ranking ministers belonged to the previous generation of previously exiled political activists who returned to Iraq after 2003. Muqtada al-Sadr's Saʾirun alliance is the leading representative of the new generation of Iraqi leadership.

According to the election rules instituted in 2004, one of every three nominees in every party list must be a woman, ensuring that women make up at least one-quarter of members of parliament. During the May election, in another unprecedented event, a woman was the head of a party list. Dr. Majida al-Tamimi was placed at the helm of the "Saʾirun" party, and she won an impressive 55,000 votes in her electoral district of Baghdad – more than any other nominee on the party list. Despite al-Tamimi's victory, her name was not mentioned as a recommendation for the party's nominee for the position of prime minister.[7]

Though the odds seem to favor someone from the Sadr-ʿAbadi camp, it is still too early to predict who will be named the next prime minister of Iraq, or, for that matter, how long the coalition negotiations will last. It is important to emphasize that even if a 'technocratic government' is formed, the position of prime minister is not meant to be held by a technocrat. The future prime minister will need to be a decisive figure capable of uniting or at least managing a highly fractured country. He cannot be subject to the whims of officials outside of the political system. The Iraqi public has grown weary of corrupt "National Unity" governments incapable of effective government. These previous governments were a direct reaction to the civil war that broke out in Iraq following the American-led occupation of the country. Many in Iraq now feel that the country is ready for a majority government in the Council of Representatives based on solid principles. These principles include the strengthening of the country through the establishment of effective, transparent institutions that benefit of all Iraqi citizens, the rehabilitation of Iraq's cities and infrastructure, and using oil

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[6] Muhsin Hussein, "Arqam Muthira Tad'u al-'Ajb Dakhil Sanadiq Baghdad" (Odd Numbers Cause wonder in Baghdad's Ballot Boxes), *Azzaman*, May 23, 2018.

[7] Abd al-Latif al-Mussawi, "Tanafus Shadid bayn al-'Abadi wal-Maliki lil-Thafr bil-Kutla al-Akbar" (Close Competition Between al-'Abadi and al-Maliki to Hold on the Bigger Block), *Azzaman*, May 26, 2018.

revenues to improve the standard of living for the population. Based on the initial results, a large number of Iraqis appear to have expressed their support for the "Iraq first" option.

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