



Iraqi Elections and the Rise of Political Al-Sadr

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On 12 May 2018, Iraqis voted in the country's first election since the defeat of Daesh in Iraq. Hopes were high for a new start after the rise, war and defeat of Daesh fractured society and left large parts of the country destroyed. This info-sheet assesses the election results and their implications for the future of Iraq.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion and subsequent removal of Saddam Hussein, Iran and an assortment of other, international actors, have attempted to influence Baghdad. While Tehran has used Iraq as a springboard to project its power to other sectors of the region, the US, a collection of European allies and the Arab Gulf countries have been working to limit and constrain Iranian ambitions.

Outgoing Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, had already begun to de-sectarianise Iraqi political life and tried — hard — to unite Sunni and Shia in his alliance. At the same time, Al-Abadi managed to retain strong ties to both Iran and the US while fostering good working relations with the Sunni-majority countries in the region. Having taken-over from Nouri Al-Maliki (2014), who was criticised for sectarianism (and his tolerance for corruption), Al-Abadi managed to juggle the competing interests of the US and Iran, however, there remained a large distrust in politics among the population, as Iraq's political landscape continued to be plagued by corruption and widespread incompetence among government officials.

This sentiment became apparent during the May 2018 elections, with only 44.5% voter turnout reported. The election dealt a surprising blow to Al-Abadi, whose bloc came third with 42 seats. The surprising winner was prominent Shia cleric, Moqtada Al-Sadr, whose bloc secured 54 seats, which does not constitute a majority in the 329-seat parliament. The second strongest party, with 47 seats, was the Fatah bloc, led by Hadi Al-Ami-

ri, a close ally of Iran, who heads a multitude of Shia paramilitary groups.

Al-Sadr adopted similar tactics to Al-Abadi. His bloc included individual Sunni politicians, the Iraqi Communist Party and secular forces in the expansive Sairoon Alliance for Reform. The point of unification of the disparate political parties is fierce opposition to any foreign interference in Iraq—a message directed simultaneously at Tehran and Washington. Al-Sadr is known in the US for having led a Shia uprising against US-troops beginning from April-May 2004 and lasting until Al-Sadr's self-imposed exile to Qom, Iran (2007-2011) came to an end and the cleric returned to Iraq. Al-Sadr's experience in Iran convinced him that Tehran's interests ran counter to the national aspirations of Iraq and changed course.

Abandoning a strict militant-sectarian agenda, Al-Sadr laid-down his arms and ran on a nationalist ticket with the promise to fight corruption. This agenda earned him strong support among the nation's young and poor; the disenfranchised whose trust had been eroded from prolonged elite corruption, rampant sectarianism and leaders that were unable to fulfil basic promises to the governed. The Sairoon did not run in the Kurdish province of Dohuk or the majority Kurdish, ethnically mixed province of Kirkuk. It gained the most votes in the capital of Baghdad.

The rise of Al-Sadr is also a reflection of growing populist, nationalist and anti-establishment movements around the world and his key electorate was constituted of the disillusioned and frustrated underclasses across Iraq. While Al-Sadr is now championing himself as a modern voice for a united Iraq, his sectarian upbringing and early political career must also be remembered—especially since his religious fervour led him to promote violence against the country's Sunni and minority communities while infusing national discourses with a radicalized Shia version of Islam. Al-Sadr opposes the participation of women in politics and remains a convinced practitioner of political Islam.

Al-Sadr did not contend in the elections himself and, therefore, will not assume any public office. However, he will likely decide on who occupies the key posts and Al-Sadr — flush from the Sairoon's electoral victory — has already met Al-Abadi to discuss forming a government that will represent Iraqi interests: fight corruption and exogenous interference.

Despite the trans-ethnic and trans-sectarian alliance Al-Sadr is attempting to stitch together the Al-Sadr/Al-Abadi coalition may still fail to govern. Tehran

announced — even before the election — that it would ‘not allow’ Al-Sadr, and communist (or leftist) forces, to rule its neighbour—the challenges facing Iraq remain considerable. In the process of building consensus, and a government, Iraq will likely face months of tough negotiations. This is the ultimate test in the post-Saddam experiment of democracy in Iraq and will reveal whether the motley crew of political rivals carry on their struggles through the power of the pen and debate or if — as in times past — these spillover onto the streets and from the streets to the morgues.

We at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre will continue to closely monitor the developments in Iraq. Developing a sustainable and inclusive Iraq that represents all segments of society is the only way for peace and prosperity to return to the country. Finally, we are optimistic that Iraq—as an Arab Gulf country—will continue to develop lasting peaceful relations to the other Arab countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE and Jordan.

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In a surprising development following weeks of intense talks between political groups, Al-Sadr and Al-Amiri have announced an alliance, the first tangible step toward forming a government since the elections last month. Despite Al-Amiri having close ties to Iran and running on a Shiite agenda, the pair announced that their alliance would be a nationalist one.

The agreement comes after calls for a recount or new elections have surged in the country, and the judiciary has been mandated with organizing a recount, however, details are not yet known. On Sunday, 09 May, a warehouse in which ballot boxes were stored caught on fire.

Former president Al-Abadi, who stated he was not in favor of a recount, had not yet announced his position toward the new alliance.

Previously, US—as well as Iranian— officials met with political groups to discuss progress in the forming of a new government.

Whereas the new alliance is a surprising development, it is an important step toward forming a government, and has the positive attribute of keeping with Al-Sadr’s nationalist message, which will be crucial in uniting the Iraqi people. It remains to be seen if Al-Abadi will join the coalition, which is still 64 seats short of the majority needed to form a government.