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Iraq

Sadr, Sectarianism, and a Popular Alternative

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV521 - June 2018 -

Publication date: Friday 22 June 2018

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Recent elections in Iraq show that the country's voters are tired of a political system that produces only corruption and inequality.

Last month, in the first Iraqi elections since ISIS's defeat in Mosul, Sairoun, or "March for Reforms" – an electoral alliance led by Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the Iraqi Communist Party, and several other smaller groups – placed in first. [1]

Sairoun was followed by Fateh Alliance, the political branch of Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Forces), Iranian-backed, Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist militias; the Victory Alliance, led by current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi; and, finally, the State of Law Coalition, headed by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Many members of parliament, some of whom had been in office since the first post-invasion elections in 2005, lost their seats. [2] In total, 215 of 329 deputies in parliament are rookie legislators.

The election sparked a cascade of fraud accusations, particularly from prominent political figures who were unseated. The parliament has ordered a manual recount and the scrapping of all ballots cast by Kurdish security forces, internally displaced people, and diaspora voters. It has also voted to suspend the electoral commission and appointed nine judges in place of the commissioners. (The commission said it would appeal the move.)

The Sadrist movement – known for fighting occupying US forces throughout the 2000s as well as for its involvement in sectarian crimes during the same period – has rejected these measures. Sadr's top aide, Dhiaa al-Asadi, declared in a tweet that while any fraud or violations in the electoral process should be condemned, the electoral commission and the federal court should handle it. He also expressed concerns that some parties are trying to sabotage Sadr's victory, accusing opponents of hijacking and manipulating the parliament.

The postelection contretemps has increased tensions in a country already on edge. In the lead-up to the election, the Communist Party's Baghdad headquarters were targeted by two homemade bombs. Since the election, an explosion has rocked Sadr City, Sadr's main stronghold in Baghdad, killing eighteen people and wounding more than ninety. On June 8, a string of explosions hit the city of Kirkuk.

Then, on June 10, a storage site holding half of Baghdad's ballot boxes went up in flames. The warehouse contained votes cast in the predominately Shi'a al-Rusafa area of Baghdad.

What's Behind Sadr's Victory?

The victory of Sadr's "March for Reforms" alliance should be read in two ways. First, Iraqis have expressed their disgust at the country's sectarian political system, social inequalities, and decrepit public services. According to the Iraqi government, absolute poverty levels reached 22.5 percent of the total population in 2014. Other estimates put the number even higher: some claim that nearly 10 million Iraqis, or well over a quarter of the country, live in abject poverty.

The second major reason for Sairoun's first-place finish is discontent with the sectarian ruling class, an outgrowth of the US and British-led invasion. [3] The sectarian ruling class is composed of all the various heads of ethnic or

sectarian-based political movements in the country. The Shi'a fraction of the political and economic elite has been by far the dominating actor since 2003, gaining nearly absolute control over the state's institutions and resources. This isn't to say that Iraqi Shi'a are a privileged community – the vast majority have not benefited economically from their leaders' political dominance and have suffered from the corruption and dysfunction of the state public services.

Since 2015, Iraqis of various stripes have launched massive popular protests against that very system. The alliance between the Sadrists, the Iraqi Communist Party, and other groups emerged from these mobilizations, which chanted: "Bread, freedom, civil state (nonsectarian)." The Iraqi Communist Party and other secular groups organized weekly protests at Tahrir Square, a short walk from the Green Zone and the seat of the Iraqi government. Sadr's supporters joined the protests early on, and in 2016, his supporters stormed the heavily fortified Green Zone and temporarily took control of government buildings.

Still, an electoral alliance between the various protest camps wasn't a forgone conclusion. Iraqi Communist Party secretary-general Raid Jahid Fahmi said that in preparation for the elections, his party and the Sadrists agreed to focus on the issues that unite them – fighting unemployment and corruption, opposing foreign influences in Iraq – rather than those that don't: namely, women's rights and secularism. The Sadrists, for example, have not mobilized against the "Jaafari law," which would have allowed women as young as nine to marry. [4]

The Iraqi Communist Party has looked past such shortcomings in order to access the Sadrists' popular base, largely composed of Shi'a popular classes. It also hopes to push Sadr and his movement – a countrywide network of political, social, religious, and military actors – towards a more "civil" (*madani*) position. (Many in Sadr's movement were also unhappy with the alliance, criticizing the pact as a bridge too far toward secularism.)

In its election program, Sairoun emphasized anti-terrorism, anti-corruption, national reconciliation and unity, a new electoral law, improved governance, and guaranteed access to human and social rights (education, social security, decent living standards, and housing). The program was short on specifics, remaining vague about how to fight corruption or political sectarianism, the militarization of society, or regressive economic policies.

As Iraqi feminist and researcher Zahra Ali and others have noted, many leftist movements and anti-sectarian protesters have been critical of this alliance with the Sadrists. [5] [6] While some fear the instrumentalization to their advantage and the monopoly of the Sadrists in this movement originally from civil society, others see an essential contradiction between the "civil" nature of the protests and the sectarian and Islamist identity of the Sadrists, as well as their involvement in government corruption and sectarian violence. Thus, in the face of the failure of massive protests demanding a reform of the electoral law that favors the major parties in power, many have simply decided to boycott the elections.

The boycotts contributed to historically low turnout rates. Only 44.52 percent of the electorate voted, the lowest since 2003. In Baghdad, which has sixty-nine seats in parliament, only 33 percent of voters came to the polls.

Jockeying for Position

Sadr is well known for his pronouncements in favor of Iraqi sovereignty. After the 2003 invasion it was Sadr's Mehdi Army militia that staged two uprisings against US forces, and American officials described him at the time as the biggest security threat in Iraq. Sadr later dissolved the group when he left for Iran, then formed the Peace Brigades militia, in 2014, to fight the Islamic State.

He's also denounced Tehran in the past, bristling at any Iranian political or military interference in Iraq. On the night election results were announced, his supporters gathered in the center of Baghdad, chanting slogans such as "Iran out." Recently, though, Sadr has toned down his rhetoric. He now says that as a neighbor, Iran has regional interests to protect; he simply hopes they do not intrude in Iraqi affairs. He's also demanded his supporters drop anti-Iran invectives and warned that those who continue "will bring war and violence to Iraq." Sadr is likely seeking a degree of consensus with Iran rather than fundamentally challenging its influence in the country.

Nevertheless, Iran, which enjoys a great amount of political, military, and economic power in Iraq, has viewed Sadr and Sairoun warily. In February, Ali Akbar Velayati, the closest adviser to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared, "We will not let liberals and communists rule Iraq." And in the immediate aftermath of the vote, Tehran launched a political offensive to try to unite its allies and block Sadr's path to power. When they realized that pushing Sadr aside was too tall of a task, they sought to integrate Sadr into a Shi'a alliance that could neutralize his influence. Iranian officials have said they want "a strong government, far from American and Saudi pressure and from foreign interference."

Other countries are also jockeying for position. Sadr has met with ambassadors from all of Iraq's neighbors — Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait — save for Iran. And US special presidential envoy Brett McGurk traveled to Iraq to confer with various parties to influence the government's formation talks.

Sadr, suddenly the diplomat, has struck a more conciliatory tone with the current Iraqi government as well. Following the explosion in Sadr City, the cleric called on all armed groups to hand in their weapons and declared the district a weapons-free area. While Sadr had already suggested last December that his militia was ready to disarm after the defeat of the Islamic State — and he stressed that the disarmament campaign should be directed at all armed groups, not just his followers — his comments appear to be a genuine olive branch aimed at easing tensions between Sadr and the government.

National Government

Because Sadr didn't run in the elections himself, he can't become the next prime minister. But he's clearly the leading force in the negotiations to establish a new government.

On June 7, Sadr announced the establishment of a new coalition with Ammar al-Hakim's Hikma Movement and Salim al-Jabouri and Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya called the Majority National Paternal Alliance. They issued a brief road map outlining their core principles, including the strengthening of Iraq's unity, democracy, and freedoms, and a commitment to the constitution. They also signaled their support for economic reforms that would bolster the private sector and encourage investment. In other words, more neoliberalism.

A few days later, on June 13, Sadr and Hadi al-Ameri, head of Fatah Alliance, announced a pact of their two political blocs and the beginning of talks to form a government. Sadr made clear that this alliance did not negate his previous agreement with Wataniya and Hikma. The two main Kurdish parties, KDP and PUK, jointly stated they supported the Ameri-Sadr alliance as well. (Officials from the Wataniya list declared that Sairoun's alliance with Fateh violated their coalition with Sadr's list because they reject "armed wings" — a clear reference to Fatah.)

Despite calls to fight corruption and pass reforms, this alliance — hatched with two key personalities of the sectarian political system — seems to be a continuation of the status quo. Before the election, Sadr had declared he would not engage politically with Ammar al-Hakim or share a platform with him. Now he's close with him. This isn't a blow to sectarianism, but rather the bolstering of an unequal political and economic system.

Same with Sadr's alliance with Ameri. Rather than challenging Iran's influence in the country, the pact consolidates it while at the same time entrenching sectarian dynamics in state institutions. Ameri is a close ally to Tehran and former head of Badr's militia organization, which controls the interior ministry.

A Popular Solution

Last month's elections laid bare the dissatisfaction that ordinary Iraqis have with the political system and its representatives. They know that different fractions of the Iraqi bourgeoisie have used the oil industry to build and consolidate massive corruption networks, even as they suffer from unemployment and shoddy services. They know that the political system makes it very hard to address the country's problems of democracy, inequality, and economic development.

The hope for a more egalitarian and democratic political system does not lie in the electoral alliance led by Sadr, or postelection elite deal-making, but in the ongoing popular protests against sectarianism, corruption, and the neoliberal economic policies. Many workers and trade unions have continued to strike and demonstrate against the electricity privatization. Protests have erupted against the failure to provide essential services like water. The continuous resistance by feminist and women's associations and groups opposed to the Jaafari Law has also been significant. [7] A bright spot in last month's contest was the reelection of Majida Al-Tamimi, who became famous for fighting corruption, social injustice, and sectarianism, as well as for her rejection of the Jaafari law, as a Sairoun candidate in Baghdad.

The recent elections could therefore represent a new step forward in the deepening of popular resistance from below and in the building of progressive alternatives to the Iraqi ruling class – a ruling class that increasingly includes Sadr himself.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-out-iraq-free-jubilation-sadr-communist-alliance-wins-big-592381343>

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/chilcot-report-iraq-war-blair-america-wmd>

[3] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/no-more-imperial-crusades>

[4] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-law-nine-year-old-girl-marry-child-marriage-women-group-a8054111.html>

[5] <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/l-irak-cherche-a-tourner-la-page-ouverte-par-l-invasion-americaine.2494>

[6] <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/38931/left-wing-alliances-and-political-contestation-in-lebanon-and-iraq/>

[7] <http://assafirarabi.com/en/20883/2018/04/16/al-jaffaari-civil-status-law-drives-iraqi-women-back-to-female-bondage-age/>