



Iraqis Council of Representatives' October Elections: What Kind of Change Will it Hold?

Commentary

by Christel Haidar¹

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Introduction:

On 30 July 2020, Iraq's general elections were announced to be held in June this year. Yet, this early election date was pushed back to 10 October recently by an agreement taken by Iraq's cabinet. The decision came in response to the Independent Higher Electoral Commission (IHEC) request to address "technical" needs considered necessary to attain a transparent and free electoral course. Although no further details were spelled out on what these issues were, the office of Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi made the [statement](#) that "*resolving the issues would ensure the integrity of the elections and equal opportunities for everyone to run in the elections freely and fairly.*" Some reports indicate that they concern voters' registration, setting up new parties, finalizing "alliances", and preparing candidates' lists.

The earlier decision to hold elections one year earlier than the due date was a response to the widespread anger towards Iraq's political and economic system, which manifested itself in the [protests](#) that began on October 1, 2019. The unrest was fuelled by "*then Prime Minister Adel Abdulmahdi's demotion of General Abdul Wahab Al-Saadi of the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), who had led the fight against ISIS*". Mainly young protesters took to the streets to call for an end to the sectarian political system that had been made "*subservient to Iranian diktat.*". *The move was seen as Iranian interference to change a "national hero" with an Iranian loyalist as the CTS was a rival to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the conglomerate of Shia militia sponsored by Iran*". The protests caused Adel Abdulmahdi government to step down, to be replaced by Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi's caretaker government until the current al-Kadhimi government was formed on May 7, 2020.

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What happened during the 11 months?

In early November 2020, after 11 months of constant struggle, the parliament succeeded in reaching an agreement to ratify an annex to the law defining Iraq's electoral districts. Iraqis feared the domination of one party over the political course of the country. Therefore, they demanded a just electoral law that would reduce this monopoly and give the opportunity for new, small, and independent parties to enter the parliament. With this new law, the candidates attaining the greatest number of votes will become MPs, rather than relying on complex mathematical methods that make the entrance of independent candidates to the parliament nearly impossible. In this law, the votes go directly to the candidate and not to the list.

In the 11 months of debates, the proposed annex to the electoral law underwent [several changes](#) before it was finally approved. First, on 11 November 2019, President Salih, with the help of civil society organizations and consultants, drafted and sent the first version to the office of the Prime Minister for approval. It included 3 electoral dimensions: *“the general parliamentary elections, local elections (i.e., for governorate councils), and the organization of the Independent High Electoral Commission that oversees the electoral process.”* He tried to satisfy the protesters' demands. However, at that time the Presidency of the Council of the Ministers was facing calls from the protesters for its removal, so the PM took a step and without making any fundamental amendments to the provisions of the laws, he separated the draft law into 2 laws (the Parliamentary Elections Law and the Independent High Electoral Commission Law). An amendment was also made to the local elections, which until today has not been yet approved. Then the new draft was sent to the parliament. After receiving the full draft, the parliament started facing disputes revolving around the proposed electoral districts. Finally, after applying several amendments, the MPs were able to reach an agreement.

To point out, in this new annex they neglected the demands of the protesters, which were initially included in the President's first draft such as the presence of a district for each electoral seat, setting the minimum age for candidacy at 25, and the requirement of the candidate to have a diploma or bachelor's degree.

Changes Coming with the New Electoral System:

Before the enactment of the new electoral law of 2020, each of the country's 18 provinces formed an electoral district. The number of seats in each district was proportionate to the number of respective province's population. In case the number of votes one candidate got

exceeded the minimum for election, the candidates' votes would be passed on to other party members in their list to achieve balance. This system featured a weakness as it favoured large parties and increased divisions. Iraq's political parties belong to the few cases in the world, where the parties are organized on a sectarian and ethnic basis. The system strengthened these divisions in Iraq's political structure, while further deepening societal divisions.

The new law shows traces of moving away from party-based to candidate-based system while keeping some of the old features. To start with, instead of designating each of 18 governorates as one electoral district, the country is now divided into [83 electoral districts](#), each having constituencies in proportion to their population density. Each district will be represented by 3-5 members of parliament and each MP will represent the district (s)he was elected based on the first-past-the-post electoral system. The highlight of the reforms in the Constitution is the prerequisite that requires [25%](#) of the parliament's 329 seats to be allocated for women. [Other reforms](#) include the necessity of the candidates to be either born or resident in the district that they are representing, and they must be of 28 years old, holding minimum a secondary school degree. This age criteria came as response to the protesters' demands, who sought the minimum age to be 25 years old.

Coalitions and voters:

To predict the likely outcome of the October elections, understanding who the [candidates, coalitions, and voters](#) are is needed. The only formal coalition formed so far is the "Power of the National State Coalition." This coalition includes the political parties belonging to the leaders Haider al-Abadi (former Prime Minister) and Ammar al-Hakim. Al-Hakim, a cleric and politician, had previously led the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq before breaking from it to establish the "National Wisdom Movement." This movement was formed based on being a "civic" rather than an Islamic political party. [Al Abadi announced](#) that this new coalition has a centrist national political force that believes in the state and works to consolidate its principles and structure, and works to enhance the prestige and sovereignty of its legitimate institutions towards all the internal and external crises that surround it.

However, post-hoc [informal coalitions](#) are expected. First, between Muqtada al-Sadr's movement and Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Second, between Hadi al Ameri's Fateh coalition and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), co-led by Lahur and Bafel Talabani.

Al-Sadr and Barzani both enjoy close ties with Iran. Al-Sadr is a populist cleric with a reputation for being politically inconsistent. The current speaker of the parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi, is anticipated to align with them. A coalition as such would be catastrophic for the already diminishing freedom of speech in Iraq, as both the Sadrists and KDP have been known to curtail freedoms.

Iraq's new and smaller electoral districts mean that they will be focusing on the districts in which they can win, rather than having too many candidates running. This has resulted in a [steep drop](#) in the number of candidates registered from 7,178 in 2018 to 3,532 in 2021.

Sadr's withdrawal and the boycott of others:

The United Nations has [agreed](#) to the Iraqi government's request for further electoral assistance by providing election-day monitoring. They have expressed their intention to communicate their role with the Iraqi public, which is crucial as many activists have expressed a demand for [international oversight](#) to ensure electoral integrity.

[Belkis Wille](#) of the Human Rights Watch reports that since the demonstrations began in October 2019, the Independent High Commission for Human Rights of Iraq has recorded 81 assassination attempts on anti-government activists and journalists, of which 34 have been successful. Practically third of these killings have taken place since Al-Kadhimi became prime minister in May last year. Kadhimi's government has failed to hold anyone accountable and reach justice.

The [murder of Ehab Wazni](#), a Karbala-based activist, on May 9, led hundreds of protesters to take to the street, who blamed pro-Iran Shia militants for the attack and demonstrated outside the Iranian consulate. Wazni's murder has disturbed the election environment and by the end of May, several activist movements declared that they would be boycotting the elections.

On July 24, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) joined the ranks of the boycotters, despite running beside the Sadrists in the 2018 elections. The head of the ICP [clarified](#) that the boycott of the elections is to strip the government from its legitimacy. He added that "*the scheduled elections do not reflect the demands of the protestors, particularly not the legal changes required, nor the appropriate security environment, nor the independence of the electoral commission.*" Several protest-based parties consented to his argument, however, some are still questioning the merits of the boycott and running for office.

The populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, head of Iraq's Sadrist movement, [declared on July 15](#) that he would not participate in the October 10 early elections. Afterward, hundreds of Sadrist supporters congregated in a symbolic protest in different cities in southern Iraq to burn their electoral cards showing that they also will not take part in the elections. Sadr said *he withdrew his support from all politicians — even those affiliated with his movement — in this government and the one that would be formed after the elections.*

He had made the same blackmail in previous elections. For example, [in 2017](#), he told his supporters in Baghdad, that he would boycott upcoming [elections](#) unless the country's electoral law was changed. He said, if *"the law remains ... this means that we will order a boycott of the elections"*.

The reason for his behaviour at the time was the rallies that broke out since [summer 2015](#), demanding enhanced services and opposing widespread corruption. During that time, al-Sadr had lost some of his political influence, but his political game was so strong that it brought him back into the arena, especially due the appeal of his calls for demonstrations to push for reforms. *"This was an apparent effort by him to re-launch his campaign and remind people of his message – and thousands heeded his call."* He ended up joining the elections at a strategic time leading to a victory for himself and the Sairoun Alliance. Against this background, it is arguable this has become a modus operandi for him in the run-up to the elections.

As for Sadr's recent announcement of withdrawal from these elections, he is certainly not out of the political equation. This would necessitate the withdrawal of the Sadrist political bloc — the Sairoun Alliance — from the parliament, where it holds the majority of the seats (52 seats), also the resignation of the allied ministers and officials.

The time will show whether Sadr will participate in the elections or not. But in any case, his political bloc as of now remains in the Iraqi government as an independent bloc. His assertion will not be real until the Sairoun Alliance withdraws officially from the elections. The [media spokeswoman for the Council of Commissioners](#), Jumana Al-Ghalay, announced in a statement on July 17 that *"there is no submission for withdrawal after the period set for accepting withdrawal requests, which extended from June 13 to 20 of the same month,"* stressing that *"doors are closed to withdrawing from the electoral process."*

Sadr is only playing a [political game](#) to activate the Iraqi public, especially the Shiites, for the Sairoun Alliance and avoid public dissatisfaction with him and his political bloc, which could result in a drop in his political support. Recently, he has been under immense pressure owing to the failure of his affiliated ministries and public institutions in delivering services to Iraqis.

The Ministry of Electricity, Ministry of Health, and the central bank are affiliated with Sadr. In the hottest weeks of summer this July, the southern provinces experienced up to 90% of electricity shortages. “Imam Hussein Hospital” in Nasiriyah was destroyed by fire due to lack of safety measures, resulting in around 100 deaths. “Ibn al-Khatib Hospital” in Baghdad also witnessed a similar incident, which resulted in more than 100 casualties. The economic outcomes of reducing the value of the Iraqi dinar also enraged Iraqis. This decision, regardless of its importance considering the economic reform, has a substantial impact on Iraqis due to the 50% increase in the prices of food and other goods. Besides, the role of Sadr and his militia in repressing the protesters performed a substantial role in the escalation of public resentment against him.

What to expect?

What to expect can be evaluated by going over several probable scenarios. The [probable outcome](#) of the first scenario where the public and parties representing the protestors both boycott the elections would likely be a division between the two major Shia parties, namely the Sadrists and Fateh, and their Kurdish party allies. This will likely lead to negotiations on a compromise for a Prime Minister, which can result in either a weak independent (such as Adil Abd al-Mahdi or Mustafa al-Kadhimi) or a politically backed one, who is viewed as being too associated in the political scene. As it has been through the past elections, the presidency will most probably go to the PUK, whose co-president has declared his endorsement for the re-election of President Barham Salih, the candidate with the highest political leverage in Baghdad. In spite of al-Halbousi’s anticipated electoral success in a district in Anbar, no speaker of parliament has had more than a term.

In a second scenario where there are no boycotts, more parties will rise to the political scene resulting in a division in the formation of coalitions and negotiations for ministries, offices, and positions. Despite that, the results are expected not to change but remain constant in the three high offices. The President has always been a Kurd, the Prime Minister a Shia, and the President of the parliament a Sunni. The place where it might view an evident change will be

inside the parliament, where new parties may have a stronger stance than the years before and be able to negotiate more. In this case, the country will witness a gradual change over the years within the composition and functioning of the parliament.

The third scenario would involve Sadr's withdrawal from elections. In this case, the number of boycotters is anticipated to increase, causing the elections to witness great challenges in terms of legitimacy. In response to Sadr's decision, the prime minister, parliament speaker, and head of the Hikma bloc Ammar al-Hakim, among other leaders, requested Sadr to take part in the elections to preclude such finality. Their request came from the fear of the prospect of postponing the elections due to the decline in the number of voters, as well as the lack of security and boycott of many political movements affiliated with the protesters.

Considering these circumstances, Sadr's withdrawal could be less risky for him than participating in the elections and losing political influence. Joining the boycott group would offer Sadr integrity among the protesters and opposition. He could then orchestrate his come back at a more convenient time, with more credibility and power. This indicated Sadr's parallel game of maintaining his influence and having one foot in the government and the other in the opposition.

Conclusion:

Analysts debate whether the call for a political make-up from Iraqis to achieve a new electoral law will actually lead to a meaningful transformation. What the citizens can expect is the emergence of new faces in the parliament, as the new electoral law grants them momentum and support. The [biggest winners](#) are likely going to be local tribal and religious leaders replacing some existing party candidates. But this will not lead to any substantial change in the political reality of the country. Likely, it will still be the existing parties with strong local presence and ability to influence, such as the Sadrist Movement, that are likely to benefit the most.

The [reason](#) behind that is deduced from a survey conducted by the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) in June 2021. According to the survey, more than one-third of the respondents are planning not to vote in the upcoming elections. This decision is taken due to their lack of trust in the legitimacy of the elections as a pathway for political representation and the government's ability to secure an environment, where free and fair elections can take place. Regardless of the new electoral law that empowers independent candidates, *“only 23.3% of respondents said that they believe the next elections will be “free and fair” or “somewhat free and fair”.*” If

supporters of the October 2019 revolution fail to turn out on election day, they could hand an easy win to the establishment parties. This would be a major setback for reform.

As for Sadr's announcement, [Iraqi political analysts](#) believe that his objective is a tactical retreat to distance himself from the pressures arising from the problems of basic services and those related to the Iran-US conflict. Since the 2019 protests, he has lost support. Hence, he wants to deflect public anger and blame away and redirect it to the elections. He believes he can regain popularity and restore his political legitimacy with time if elections are postponed. However, boycotting the elections appears as an attempt, similar to previous ones, to stand down a little and then come back with new momentum and strategy. It will give him more time to make necessary corrections and overcome the losses caused by the summer crises.

Ultimately, all the statements and announcements of withdrawing from the elections lack any formality, since there has not been official submissions of any request to the electoral commission. It has closed the door for withdrawals on June 20 and is continuing its preparations to hold the elections on schedule.