

Existential Questions: Iraq Gears up for Elections

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Although it may not be common knowledge to most westerners, election season has begun in Iraq. Political forces are beginning to come together, pick fights, ingratiate themselves with potential foreign patrons, and evaluate the mood of the country as it emerges from the long fight to retake Mosul and its environs from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Local elections, originally scheduled for April this year, will take place in April 2018 and simultaneously with national parliamentary elections to seat a new Council of Representatives (COR), which will produce the next prime minister.

Politics are particularly fluid now. The main battle with ISIL has been largely won in the north and northwest, although the threat has not ended and mop-up operations and counterterrorism offensives will continue. Jockeying for a post-Mosul political order is in full swing. All of this takes place against a background of regional political turmoil, with Saudi Arabia and its allies ganging up on Qatar, the bloody struggle in Syria showing no signs of abating, and Iran seeking advantage from the chaos. A planned referendum on Kurdish independence, scheduled for September of this year, has cast additional uncertainty into the mix.

In this climate, Iraq's looming electoral season is shaping up to be a seminal event in the country's political history. To a certain extent this could be—and has been—said about every Iraqi election since 2005. But this time really is different.

Since the last provincial and national elections in 2013 and 2014, respectively, ISIL's invasion created major disruptions in Iraqi politics and for a time called into question whether Iraq could survive in its present form. This existential challenge highlighted the government's incapacity to counter the threat, especially after the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the path of ISIL's advance. This calamity gave birth to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an agglomeration of mainly Shiite militias called into being in 2014 by a fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who beseeched Iraqi citizens to pick up the "sacred defense" of the country. The PMF—which include a number of pre-existing militias supported by Tehran—shouldered a major share of the fighting, cooperating with the ISF once they had regrouped. The accumulated popularity and legitimacy of the PMF opened the door to their participation in politics. Leadership shakeups in the areas controlled by ISIL have resulted in the ouster of many longstanding provincial officials and a scramble for power and influence. The Kurds, emboldened by military successes against ISIL and stronger support from the United States, have made no secret of their intention to begin negotiations with Baghdad leading to independence for the Kurdish north, starting with a referendum on the question coming up this fall. The elections will take place not only in the three northern provinces that comprise the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but also disputed areas that have fallen under Kurdish control, including the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, raising tensions with Baghdad.

In a sense, then, the elections are about how—and perhaps even whether—Iraq can be put back together again.

Initial Skirmishing and Confusion

As is the norm for Iraqi elections, politicking has already begun over the rules for the elections themselves. The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) announced late last year that provincial elections would take place on April 20, 2017. The government, however, failed to fund election preparations or pass a new electoral law until December 2016, forcing IHEC to postpone the elections until September 16 of this year. While Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi formally approved the new date, further delays came to pass until it was decided by political groupings that they will be held with those for the Council of Representatives in April 2018.

In the meantime, the disputes and concerns common to all Iraqi elections have manifested themselves. Disagreements have arisen over the minimum vote threshold required to win seats in both the provincial assemblies and the COR. The formula by which to allocate seats between top individual vote-getters and representatives of electoral slates is also at issue. Security requirements and electoral procedures also figure in the discussion.

In addition, there is some uncertainty as to the future of IHEC, whose mandate is slated to expire this September, four days after the previously scheduled provincial vote. Although the mandate could simply be extended by the COR, disagreements over the composition of

the body to pick IHEC's new members have already erupted. The politically influential Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who as leader of the Sadrist Movement commands a respectable popular following, has demanded the new body be completely apolitical rather than balancing membership equally among leading parties, and has threatened to boycott the elections if this does not occur.

Although these disputes appear petty and overly technical, they can have a real impact on electoral outcomes and provide opportunities for Iraq's scrambling politicians to make an early splash.

What to Look for...

All this aside, several broad, overlapping trends are likely to shape the elections.

First, Iraqis will try to shape a new national identity for the post-ISIL period while continuing to struggle with sectarian tensions. This will be no easier in 2017 than in previous election years. But the key question will be whether Iraqi voters can forge a more stable national idea better suited to weathering internal and external crises than they have in the past. Cross-sectarian coalitions of the type that characterized the parliamentary elections in 2010, while possible, are less likely this time around, as Iraq's ethnic and sectarian communities seek shelter in traditional affiliations after an intensely stressful and polarizing period. But while Sunnis will continue to vote mainly for Sunnis and Shiites will vote for Shiites to protect their influence

and prerogatives, all parties will seek to appeal to some idea of Iraq as a nation distinct from the sum of its parts.

Second, long-time leaders and politicians have suffered a battering in the ISIL years, particularly in the Sunni heartland. The elections mark a wide-open scramble for power and influence in those areas where familiar faces have been ousted and discredited. The squabbling will likely weaken the Sunnis' hand as they negotiate with the central government to get the best deal possible on reconstruction assistance, but it could also yield new leaders more responsive to citizens' needs.

The shakeup is not limited to the Sunnis; the Shiites face their own upheaval as well. Muqtada al-Sadr's rabble-rousing populism and his election boycott threats have challenged the mainstream political leadership (including Prime Minister Abadi). In addition, after a period of internal turmoil and challenges to his leadership, this month the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, bolted the party his family led from its beginning in 1982. He took most of ISCI's property and financial assets with him (including the Al-Furat television station), leaving a traditional pillar of the Shiite political mainstream in turmoil. Hakim has founded a new party, the National Wisdom Movement.

The rising political involvement of the PMF militias is another wild card, with many of them poised to do very well in the elections by virtue of their successes in helping the government

liberate large swaths of territory from ISIL control and having been legitimized by the COR's action last November to bring them legally under the authority of the ISF. Any success they might have could come at the expense of existing Shiite parties, who are viewed as corrupt and feckless by many. A number of militia leaders have promised change.

And in the KRG region, the two establishment parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, will remain entrenched but will face renewed pressure from the Gorran (Change) Party, which won the second largest number of seats in the Kurdish parliament in the last elections, before KRG president Masoud Barzani forced parliament's suspension in October 2015.

Prime Minister Abadi faces serious problems of his own in retaining the premiership, as opposition—much of it driven by his rival, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—continues to churn within his Dawa Party and the grouping to which it belongs, the State of Law Coalition. Abadi is generally well regarded and seen as a less sectarian and more capable leader than some of his predecessors. He has reaped some benefits from his so-far unsuccessful efforts to reform government and combat corruption, and he has received much of the credit for the government's successful (if painfully drawn-out) campaign against ISIL. But he will face pressure from a range of potential claimants to his office, including

Maliki and former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who is from outside his Dawa Party.

Third, the elections may help clarify the role of Iran going forward. Iran will certainly seek to bolster its allies, especially among the candidates and parties springing from the PMF. It will attempt to consolidate the gains it has made over the last several years of regional turmoil to bind Iraq closer by boosting its political clients and completing its land corridor to the Levant, both of which are critical policy interests as Tehran confronts Gulf Arab hostility and a Trump Administration that is taking a harder line toward Iran.

That it will be able to do so, however, is not a foregone conclusion. As Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, has noted, “Iran likes to be flattered with the view that everything that happens in Iraq and Syria happens because Iran is pulling the strings. That’s just not true ... The vision of [Iraq’s] Grand Ayatollah Sistani—of quietism and a civil state, meaning not a state governed by clerics—is totally different from the vision of [Iran’s] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The Iranians tried to do a number of things in Iraq that simply have not worked, because the Iraqis rejected it. Their influence is not dominant. I never discount the ability of the Iraqis to chart their own course.”

Indeed, despite its great political and economic influence, Iran has never been able to impose its will freely on Iraq and faces pushback from

certain quarters in which Iraqi nationalism is not just a campaign slogan.

Iran-allied politicians will likely do well in the upcoming elections, but numerous parties will seek domestic political advantage by distancing themselves from Tehran. For example, Hakim’s pullout from ISCI, an organization heavily supported by Iran, has been seen as an effort to distance himself and his supporters from Iranian influence in favor of an Iraqi “national idea.” Muqtada al-Sadr, who has touted his vision of an Iraq that is inclusive for all Iraqis whatever sect or ethnicity, certainly had an agenda when he traveled to Riyadh in July to meet with new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Other politicians can be expected to do the same. This flexibility is another important reason why the Gulf Arabs in particular should retain an open mind on Iraq and not write the country off as a hopeless Persian satrapy.

...and What to Expect

Although it is impossible to handicap the elections this early in the process, one can hazard a few guesses. For one thing, Abadi may well remain as prime minister if his coalition does well enough at the polls and, most important, if he is able to draw sufficient Kurdish and Sunni support both in the elections themselves and in the coalition-building phase that comes after. The Kurds have become comfortable with Abadi’s leadership, despite disagreements, and they probably believe an unknown successor would more likely be worse for Kurdish interests than Abadi. The Sunnis likely take a similar view, especially given

Abadi's stated position on political inclusiveness, national reconciliation, and the urgent need for reconstruction in hard-hit areas. The prime minister's willingness to display some level of independence from Iran will also work in his favor and may even help attract support from Hakim and some of the Sadrists.

While internal Kurdish politics might experience a shakeup, all the Kurdish parties agree on addressing the issue of independence directly with Baghdad, and September's independence referendum will strengthen their hand. KRG negotiators will likely take a tough line on conditions for their support of the new prime minister, whoever it might be, and on remaining in the government as part of a unified Iraq while independence talks play out.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, will remain weak and divided, choosing among a "scattered and shattered group of disparate wannabe leaders" left in disarray by the ISIL invasion and its aftermath, as a former CIA analyst and long-time Iraq watcher privately described them to this author. They will have to work out the best deals they can with Baghdad and the new prime minister while entering a period of political rebuilding, mindful of past debacles in which many Sunnis sided with Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIL in opposition to the central government.

Candidates from the Popular Mobilization Forces will emerge as a significant wild card.

Those who got their start in militias organized in response to Grand Ayatollah Sistani's call to arms in 2014 are likely to get the greater boost from their perceived service to the nation. Those seen as tools of Iran face a more uncertain future at the ballot box.

The Key Question: Iran's Future Influence

These factors lead to perhaps the biggest question in this electoral cycle – will Iran and its interests emerge stronger following the elections? Iran is too firmly entrenched in Iraq's affairs for its influence to be reversed just now, and most Iraqis either do not want a separation or are resigned to the fact that it is not realistic now. As the former analyst remarked, a better measure of Iran's influence will be how Iraq's Shiite voters answer the following for themselves: "Does Iraq or [Iran's] Supreme Leader come first when [their] priorities come into conflict?" When there is no perceived conflict between the two, there will be little disagreement among the Shiites about the virtues of cooperating with Iran. When there is a conflict, however, Iran may suddenly discover the limits of its influence.

The Iraqis' still-salient Arab identity and lingering antipathy toward their traditional enemy to the east may drive the Shiites to candidates in the mold of Abadi and Sadr – not because they oppose Iran but because of their "Iraq first" attitudes. If so, Iraq will be poised to take another step toward rebuilding its traditional role in the Middle East.