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# country report

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## Crisis of legitimacy or glimmer of hope?

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**Iraq ahead of the parliamentary elections on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

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Two years after the onset of nationwide protests in Iraq, early parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 10th, 2021. Although originally one of the central demands from the protest movement, many will probably boycott the poll. A radical change to the political landscape or even an overcoming of the ethno-confessional system in Iraq is not to be expected in the short term, but the election could still represent a directional decision: Will the country become a pawn of neighboring Iran or will it strive for an independent role in the region, whilst carefully balancing Western and Iranian influence?

### **Early elections – a central demand of the protest movement**

In October 2019, mass protests commenced in Iraq, calling for better government services, particularly an improvement of water, electricity and health services, as well as measures to address the high unemployment and to combat widespread corruption and nepotism. The nationwide wave of protests lasted for months and only lost momentum due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. It was overshadowed by the sometimes violent intervention of various security forces and attacks by pro-Iranian militias, which left more than 600 people dead and around 20,000 injured. Due to the ongoing demonstrations, Iraq's Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi resigned in late November 2019. The search for a successor plunged the country into a six-month long government crisis. After the first two candidates for the post could not garner the support of the Iraqi parliament, a majority finally voted in May 2020 for Mustafa al-Kadhimi as new Prime Minister. After taking office, al-Kadhimi assured that early elections would be held and the electoral law would be reformed – another central demand of the protesters. The new election date initially set for June 6th – almost a year before the regular date in May 2022 – was finally postponed to 10<sup>th</sup> October for technical and organizational reasons.

### **The new electoral law: strengthening of candidates instead of parties**

The October elections mark the sixth general elections in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 and the overthrow of dictator Saddam Hussein. Since the first democratic elections in 2005, the Iraqi electoral system was subjected some changes. In response to the demands of the protest movement, the Iraqi parliament passed a new electoral law in 2019, which, however, was only ratified eleven months later. The main changes include a new division of Iraq into 83 electoral districts instead of the previous 18 provincial districts. In each constituency three to five members of parliament are elected, depending on the population density, at least one of them must be a woman.<sup>1</sup> Each elected person represents around 100,000 citizens. The candidates must originate from or live in their respective constituencies, the necessary minimum age was reduced from 35 to 28 years. The protest movement, which

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<sup>1</sup> Iraqi electoral law requires that of the 329 seats in parliament at least 25% go to women.

primarily consists of young Iraqis, had previously criticized the comparatively high age restriction. Almost 50 percent of the Iraqi population is under the age of 18, therefore only about 25 million of the more than 40 million inhabitants have the right to vote.

Nine of the total of 329 parliamentary seats are reserved for minority representatives (such as Christians and Yazidis). The approximately 1.3 million internally displaced persons in the country can vote in special polling stations for their respective district. There are a total of 3,249 applicants, the proportion of women is over 29 percent. With the new electoral law, candidates will no longer be elected by a party list, instead every voter will directly choose a candidate from their respective constituencies. This undoubtedly limits the influence of the parties and strengthens the relationship between voters and elected representatives.

## The elections in a crisis of legitimacy

Despite the new electoral law, many Iraqis continue to doubt whether the election will adhere to democratic principles. In recent years, turnout steadily decreased. While at almost 80 percent in 2005, voter turnout fell to 44.5 percent by 2018. The trend shows the increasing disillusionment and the loss of trust in the political system of the country. A representative opinion poll commissioned by the KAS in autumn 2020 also confirms this: A large majority of the population has a very negative attitude towards the government and the political parties, the only exception being the incumbent Prime Minister al-Kadhimi.<sup>2</sup> The 2018 parliamentary elections were followed by a difficult and lengthy government formation, which was characterized by a political power struggle and allegations of election fraud. The ongoing economic crisis and the unstable security situation of the country are also likely to have a negative effect on the willingness to vote. The polls on October 10<sup>th</sup> will therefore be a test, whether the population still has any confidence in the complex political system or whether the alienation will continue. In order to increase confidence in the election results and to reduce the possibility of fraud, biometric voting cards and an electronic voting system will be introduced in October.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to avoid multiple voting. In addition, the results will be transmitted directly to the Independent High Election Commission of Iraq (IHEC). Election result should therefore be announced within a few hours after the polling stations close. Another measure to safeguard the elections is the appointment of international election observers. The US Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Linda Thomas-Greenfield, announced at the end of August that the US had again provided 5.2 million US dollars for the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI). Germany's share is 1 million euros. The UN and the European Union (EU) will each provide 130 international election observers, making this the largest election observation mission of its kind worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Marsin Alshamary, a fellow of the *Middle East Initiative*, warns, however, that even international observers have limited resources to avoid electoral fraud. They might be able to contain it at the polling stations, but will not be able to prevent it entirely.<sup>5</sup> While the Iraqi government relies on the presence of international representatives to give the election more legitimacy, some IHEC employees have already been arrested ahead of the elections. They are accused of election rigging for having posted false information about politicians online. Many doubt that there will be a fair election process, a former election commissioner told the KAS that even he does not believe in an election free of fraud.

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<sup>2</sup> 50% of the respondents said they had a very positive or positive attitude towards the Prime Minister, while 90% stated an aversion to the political parties, 69% towards the speaker of parliament and 64% towards the government. See: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, [Opinion Poll on the Protest Movement in Iraq](#), November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> According to the IHEC, a large number of Iraqis, however, are still not biometrically registered and only hold the old voting card.

<sup>4</sup> See: United States Mission to the United Nations, [Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on Iraq](#), 25 August 2021. The KAS Syria/Iraq office, together with Iraqi cooperation partners, also trains election observers nationwide and supports the elections in Iraq in many ways, for example by training candidates and through various workshops on political voter education and mobilization.

<sup>5</sup> Marsin Alshamary in an interview on September 3, 2021.

## Election boycott as political tool?

Further skepticism about the validity of the elections arose with the call for boycott by the popular Shiite cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Sadr's *Sairoun* movement emerged as the strongest force in the 2018 parliamentary elections. The Iraqi nationalist and populist, who is not exactly known for his political predictability, has a large Shiite following and controls one of the strongest militias in the country.<sup>6</sup> A boycott on his part would probably have resulted in an extremely low turnout and an intra-Shiite rift. It was not the first time that Sadr turned his back on the political system in order to pursue his own power interests.<sup>7</sup> Experts see Sadr's temporary withdrawal as an attempt to save face and evade public criticism by trying to give the impression that he is not part of the (hated) political system, even though his movement occupies several key ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Electricity. These two departments in particular have come under strong criticism in recent months after numerous people were killed in several devastating hospital fires and the already inadequate power supply in Iraq worsened. On August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021, al-Sadr reversed his decision to boycott the election and is now participating again with his party.

Numerous members of the young protest movement are still calling for an election boycott (most recently at a conference in Baghdad on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021) because they question the integrity, fairness and equal opportunities of the electoral process and the actors involved. Major hurdles, such as the still relatively high minimum age for candidates (28 years) and the enormous costs, also make it very difficult for independent candidates to run for the election. To register a new party in Iraq, 3,000 signatures must be collected in three provinces and the party has to pay the equivalent of USD 20,500 in registration fees. Furthermore, each candidate is required to deposit around USD 6,850. This means that many parties can only support a small number of applicants nationwide, while established parties with large funds can nominate more candidates. In addition, some individuals of the protest movement were recruited by established parties. While some new parties still managed to raise the necessary funds, many withdrew their participation in early May 2021, after the well-known activist Ihab al-Wazni was murdered in Karbala. The climate of fear, especially of kidnappings and targeted killings by pro-Iranian militias, discourages many people from running as a candidate or campaigning for an independent nominee.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite all of the points mentioned, an election boycott would ultimately strengthen the old elites, leaving them unrivaled and able to exclude the protest movement from parliamentary decision-making. Furthermore, a low turnout would make it difficult for a new government to gain the legitimacy necessary to address the many challenges the country is facing.

## No major changes to the political landscape, but a choice of direction

In all likelihood, there will be no clear winner obtaining more than 100 of the 329 parliamentary seats in this election. As in 2018, al-Sadr's *Sairoun* movement is likely to win the largest number of MPs. The other established Shiite parties and alliances, such as the Iran-affiliated *Al-Fateh* movement (runner-up in 2018), the (non-pro-Iranian) *National State Forces Alliance*<sup>9</sup> as well as the Kurdish and Sunni parties will probably also – with minor losses – roughly hold their 2018 results. It can be assumed that the Sadrists and the

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<sup>6</sup> While al-Sadr opposes the influence of any foreign power in Iraq, following the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis by a US drone in January 2020, the cleric grew closer to Iran.

<sup>7</sup> In both 2007 and 2013, the Sadrists took part in the formation of the government and appointed various ministers, only to distance themselves from the government and join the opposition later on. In 2019, the *Sairoun movement* initially supported the anti-government protests, while at the same time being an elementary part of the administration.

<sup>8</sup> In May 2021, the Iraqi Human Rights Commission assumed that since the protests began in October 2019, a total of 81 attacks had been carried out, targeting Iraqi activists and journalists, with 34 people being killed.

<sup>9</sup> The *National State Force Alliance* is an alliance between the *Al-Nasr party* of former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018) and the *Al-Hikma Movement* under Ammar al-Hakim.

*Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP) as well as the *Al-Fateh* and the *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK) will maintain their informal alliance of 2018. The decisive question is whether the large number of medium-sized pro-Iranian parties will emerge stronger from the election or whether political parties and blocs that reject Tehran's influence or are at least critical of it, will gain the upper hand. In this regard, the ballot box can also be seen as a kind of choice of direction between an Iraq under the sway of neighboring Iran or a country with an independent role in the region that strives for a balance between Western and Iranian influence. Who will hold the power in Baghdad in the coming years will be of great relevance, for example, when it comes to the extent to which the NATO mission (which has grown to a strength of 4,000 soldiers), will continue the fight against the terrorist organization "Islamic State" together with the Iraqi army.

As far as the political landscape is concerned, no surprises are to be expected, concludes the chairman of the *Iraq Advisory Council*, Farhad Alaaldin: "The election is expected to reduce the influence of some traditional forces; we will have some faces disappear from Iraqi politics, such as Ayad Allawi, and have the influence of some others such as Maliki be reduced. There will be a large number of independents which could change the balance of power in many ways."<sup>10</sup> But even with fewer seats in parliament, the traditional parties and blocs will continue to control the government formation and the Iraqi power structure. They have the advantage of being familiar with the system, had decades to establish networks and buy loyalties and have important channels for mobilizing and retaining voters (e.g. through their own media channels). Thus, for many years to come, these forces will continue to have a decisive influence on the political landscape in Iraq. The parties from the protest movement will probably only win a small number of seats in this election, either because, as mentioned above, they were unable to participate in the election or because their internal fragmentation prevented them from forming a unified bloc and competing effectively together.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all these points, an optimistic outlook is possible. In the long term, the entry of new, independent and secular forces into parliament can lay the foundation for a policy that shifts the focus in Iraq away from identity politics based on religion and ethnicity to a program-based policy. The wave of protests since 2019 have undoubtedly contributed to the development of an Iraqi self-image beyond ethnic-denominational dividing lines.<sup>12</sup> A breaking up of the old structures and, last but not least, the entry of young, reform-oriented MPs into the Iraqi parliament should set new impulses. In the upcoming years, this could also strengthen the belief in Iraqi democracy and make an important contribution to restoring the lost trust in parliament, the government and other state institutions.

All of this will undoubtedly take some time and will certainly be accompanied by further protests, particularly from young Iraqis, who hope for a fast and sustainable improvement to their difficult living conditions.

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<sup>10</sup> Farhad Alaaldin in a written interview on September 1, 2021. Former Vice President Ayad Allawi (2014-2015 and 2016-2018) and his party *Iraqi Platform* also announced their boycott of the elections after Sadr's resignation. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014) leads the pro-Iranian *State of Law* movement in the election.

<sup>11</sup> The objectives of the individual actors within the protest movement are sometimes very different: while some want to bring down the entire political system, others just demand a reform of it.

<sup>12</sup> See: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, [Youth Revolution or Identity-Forming Movement?](#) October 2020.

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