



Election Report

IRAQ

2021 Parliamentary Elections and the Crisis of Government Formation

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Introduction

On 10 October 2021, the sixth parliamentary elections were held in Iraq to elect 329 members of the Council of Representatives (CoR).¹ A total of 3325 candidates, including 21 political coalitions, 108 political parties and 789 independent candidates competed for office (IHEC, 2021). The elections per se were conducted peacefully, but Iraqi citizens' enthusiasm for elections was significantly low. The voter turnout – officially standing at only 43.54%² according to Independent High Election Committee's (IHEC) official election figures – was the lowest since the country's first parliamentary elections in 2005 (IHEC, 2021). The elections resulted in 138 seats taken by members of coalitions, 148 seats by members of political parties and 43 seats by independent candidates (IHEC, 2021). What was remarkable about the results was a relative victory of the Sadrist Movement led by Shi'a cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, whose seats at the CoR increased from 54 in 2018 to 73, and a surprise defeat to some of the established political forces, particularly a pro-Iran Shi'a force of the Fateh Alliance who saw a sharp decline of seats from 48 to 16, thereby upsetting the existing political balance within Iraqi political elites (Mansour & Stewart-Jolley, 2021).

As will be mentioned later in this report, the Iraqis had to wait almost one year to finally witness the formation of the government in October 2022. Hence, in order to incorporate the post-election parliamentary dynamics into analysis, primarily the impact of the initially ratified election results on the (delayed) formation of the government, the publication of this electoral report had to be waited until this parliamentary milestone.

1. Background to the Elections

Political turmoil characterised the days and months leading to the October 2021 elections. The parliamentary elections are constitutionally mandated to take place every four years. Based on this rule, the elections were supposed to take place in May 2022 (since the last elections were in May 2018). However, the unprecedented scale of popular protest movement, known as the Tishreen Movement, which started in October 2019 caused nationwide political turmoil and forced the government to call for earlier elections. The popular protest movement demanded comprehensive political and economic reforms, including the fall of the established political elites such as the prime minister, a reform of the electoral law and early elections (Alshamary, 2022; Dagher, 2022). The protest movement led to

¹ The number of seats at CoR is decided based on a ratio of one seat per 100,000 Iraqis as stipulated by Article 49 of the Iraqi constitution (Constitution of Iraq, 2005). As a result of the population increase, the number of seats at CoR increased from 275 in 2005 to 329 in 2021.

² Based on the number of registered voters (22,116,368) divided by the actual votes (9,629,601) (IHEC, 2021).

the resignation of then-Prime Minister Adil Abd Al-Mahdi in November 2019, ratification of the new electoral law in November 2020 and a call for earlier elections by his successor, Prime Minister Kadhimi, when he assumed office in May 2020. Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi initially scheduled the election for June 2021. Still, it had to be postponed to October 2021 due to “parliament’s failure to make the necessary preparations” (Younis, 2021, para.3). Moreover, prior to the elections, such opposition political parties as the 25 October Movement, the Iraqi House, the Organization of Opposition Forces and the National House, decided that they would boycott the upcoming elections, claiming that “the pre-electoral environment was not safe” in light of the violent state repression against anti-government protestors (Alshamary, 2022, p.2). Pre-electoral surveys found that a large segment of Iraqi society was also inclined to boycott the elections due to, for example, “perceptions that the government is unable to impose the rule of law and prevent political intimidation” (Gustafason et al., 2021; Jiyad, 2021, p.15; Younis, 2021). As such, political havoc characterised the pre-election environment in Iraq, yet the sixth parliamentary elections per se were conducted peacefully on 10 October 2021.

2. Quantitative Indices of Democracy:

This section of the report explores the rankings and classifications that Iraq was placed in prior to the 2021 elections.

Table 1: Quantitative indices of democracy in Iraq

Measurement	Name and Year of Report	Institution	Index	Point, Ranking and Classification
Political Rights and Freedom	Freedom House Report 2021	Freedom House (FH)	PR: Political Rights CL: Civil Liberties	PR: 16 (scale of 1 = least free to 40 = most free) CL: 13 (scale of 1 = least free to 60 = most free) Classification: Not free
Perception of Corruption	Corruption Perception Index 2021	Transparency International	TICPI: corruption perceptions index	TICPI: 23 out of 100 points (scale of 1 = very corrupt to 100 = not at all corrupt) Rank: 157 out of 180
Political Transformation	Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2021	Bertelsmann Foundation	PT: Political Transformation	PT: 4.13 out of 10 Rank: 90 out of 137 Classification: Moderate Autocracy
Democracy Quality	Democracy Matrix 2020	German Research Foundation (DFG)	QT: Quality of Democracy	QT: 0.354 (scale of 0 = worst quality of democracy to 1 = best quality of democracy) Rank: 127 out of 176 Classification: Moderate Autocracy
Election Integrity	V-Dem 2021	Varieties of Democracy Institute	ED: Electoral Democracy CE: Clean Elections	ED: 0.37 out of 1 CE: 0.36 out of 1

3. Definition of the Political System

The Iraqi political system is a federal parliamentary republic. A national referendum approved the permanent constitution in October 2005. Its Article 1 defines the country as a “single federal, independent and fully sovereign state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic” (Constitution of Iraq, 2005, p.4).³ As per Article 49 of the constitution, members of CoR are elected by a direct secret general ballot.

Since 2005, political parties have been performing the so-called informal consociational ethnoreligious quota system –Al-Muhasassa Al-Ta’ifiyya (المحاصصة الطائفية)–, although the constitution stipulates only the post-election parliamentary procedure per se without making reference to the ethnoreligious distribution of political power (Dodge, 2020).⁴ The constitution stipulates that following the ratification of the election results, members of the CoR elect the Speaker of CoR (informally reserved for a Sunni). CoR then chooses the President (informally reserved for a Kurd), who would be charged with selecting a representative of the largest bloc in the parliament as Prime Minister-designate (informally reserved for a Shi’a). Subsequently, the Prime Minister-designate is tasked with forming a government.

4. Definition of the Electoral System and Parties

IHEC is responsible for administering national elections and referenda, including ratifying their final results. It is an independent public body stipulated by Article 102 of the constitution, enjoying administrative and financial autonomy (Constitution of Iraq, 2005; United Nations, not dated). Yet, it is the electoral law that legally stipulates the how-to of the parliamentary elections.⁵

Under the old electoral law last reviewed in 2018, which used a Modified Sainte-Laguë method with an initial divisor of 1.7⁶, the country was divided into 18 provincial districts. Voters voted for a political party or individual candidate at a provincial level.⁷ The parties could then combine all the votes they gained and

³ However, the drafting process of the constitution was not so representative, as two of the three major Shi’a parties (Dawa Party and Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement) and those representing Sunnis and secular nationalists were excluded from the final stage of the drafting process (Dodge, 2020). Because of this, Dodge (2020, p.147) contends that “undoubtedly it [i.e., the constitution] became one of the main reasons for an escalation in the civil war”.

⁴ Several scholars, including Bogaards (2021) and Horowitz (2008), have argued that the very absence of power-sharing mechanisms in the constitution has contributed to the violent political instability in the country.

⁵ For the previous revisions of the electoral law, see Stewart-Jolley (2021).

⁶ This method was used to count votes for the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections. This method arguably favoured larger political parties since the threshold was set higher, meaning that one (party or individual) needs a higher number of votes to secure a seat at CoR.

⁷ In the 2005 elections – the first since the US invasion in 2003 – the whole country was designated one electoral district.

translate them into seats at CoR. Hence, in the previous elections, parties usually nominated as many candidates as possible, resulting in the floods of candidates running for seats at CoR in every constituency.

However, before the October 2021 elections, in December 2019, CoR announced a new draft of the electoral law. It went through provisions before passing the CoR and President Barham Salih's ratification on 5 November 2020. The new electoral law came into effect on 9 November 2020 after publication in the country's official gazette. As mentioned earlier, a reform of the existing electoral law was one of the demands by the Tishreen movement (Alshamary, 2022; Dagher, 2022; Jiyad, 2021). The significant changes included the introduction of a single non-transferable voting (SNTV) system (i.e., one vote, one candidate and several seats for each constituency) and subdivision of the constituency from 18 provincial districts to 83 electoral districts. The SNTV system enabled voters to elect a member of CoR at the district level for the first time rather than choosing a party or an individual candidate at the provincial level (Jiyad, 2021). In addition, the change reduced the minimum age for candidacy from 30 to 28, an attempt to reflect more young voices into parliamentary politics. However, given that the age group of 15-25 constituted the majority of anti-government protestors, experts contend that the change was inadequate to fully integrate young activists and politicians into parliamentary politics (Alhassan, 2021; Jiyad, 2021; Stewart-Jolly, 2021).

Article 49 of the constitution requires that 25 per cent of the CoR's seats be reserved for women (Constitution of Iraq, 2005). Based on this stipulation, one seat is reserved for female candidates in every constituency. In addition, the country's electoral law stipulates that, of the 329 seats, nine shall be reserved for minority groups; five for Christians and one for Yazidis, Shabaks, Sabeans and Failis, respectively (Abdullah & Hama, 2020; Stewart-Jolley, 2021).⁸

Political parties are legal in Iraq. Article 39 of the constitution stipulates that "the freedom to join and form associations and political parties shall be guaranteed, and this shall be regulated by law" (Constitution of Iraq, 2005, p.15). This, however, does not apply when it comes to Saddamist Ba'ath. For example, its Article 7 states that "any entity or program that adopts, incites, facilitates, glorifies, promotes, or justifies. . .the Saddamist Ba'ath in Iraq and its symbols, under any name whatsoever, shall be prohibited. Such entities may not be part of political pluralism in Iraq" (Constitution of Iraq, 2005, p.5).

⁸ The reserved seats for minority groups were first introduced prior to the 2010 elections. Initially, the number of those seats were eight, but it was increased to nine in 2018 (Stewart-Jolley, 2021).

5. Impact of the Electoral System and Size of the Constituency on the Elections

Under the SNTV system, the number of candidates running for office at CoR declined by thousands. The decline can be explained by the fact that under the new SNTV system, votes for a specific candidate apply to only himself/herself and cannot be transferred to others. Hence, nominating multiple candidates from the same political party/coalition in one constituency entailed latent risks that votes could be scattered in a way that could beat all of their candidates down (Alshamary, 2022).

Moreover, in spite of the declining number of candidates, the SNTV system and the pre-elections mass protest movement led to the flooding of individual candidates running for seats at CoR. The public widely perceived these individual candidates as sympathetic to the Tishreen Movement (Alshamary, 2022). Alshamary (2022, p.6) argues that “the way the word is used in the current political discourse in Iraq goes beyond political independence [i.e., political nonpartisanship] to suggest an affinity with the protest movement, which is something a lot of candidates lack”.⁹ Due largely to this positive connotation, many of the individual candidates succeeded in securing seats at CoR, unlike in the past elections (see the “Results” section).

In relation to the change in the size of the constituency, the delineation of 83 electoral districts provoked accusations of gerrymandering favouring the established political elite. For instance, the drawing of new electoral districts did not reflect the latest population figures, relying instead on old population data. As a result, for example, the number of seats in Basra was reduced by four compared to the last election in spite of the area’s population growth over the past years (Jiyad, 2021).

6. Results:

- Turnout: 43.54%
- Votes Cast: 9,629,601
- Valid Ballots: 8,854,025
- Invalid Ballots: 775,576

⁹ There are, however, some allegations that some “individual” candidates are either formerly or currently affiliated with the existing political parties/coalitions (Alshamary 2022). For example, Alshamary (2022, p.7) reports that of the 43 successful individual candidates, “at least 11 of the independent candidates have some present or prior affiliation with entrenched political parties”.

Table 2: The results of the 2021 parliamentary elections

Party	Seats	Seats for Women	Gains/Losses from 2018
The Sadrist Bloc	73	31	+19
Taqaddum/National Progress Alliance	37	11	New
State of Law Coalition	33	5	+8
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	31	10	+6
Fateh Alliance	17	6	-31
Kurdistan Alliance/Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	17	9	-1
Azem (Determination) Alliance	14	2	New
New Generation Movement	9	4	+5
Emtidad (Extension/Continuation) Movement	9	2	New
Ishraqat Kanoon (The Glow of Kanoon)	6	1	New
Tasmeem (Resolve) Coalition	5	0	New
Alliance of National State Forces	4	1	-58
Babylonians Movement	4	2	+2
National Contract Alliance	4	1	New
Hasem (Decisive) Movement for Reform	3	1	New
Our Masses are our Identity Alliance	3	1	New
Parties which won one seat each	17	3	-
Independents	43	5	-
Total	329	95	0

Source: Independent High Election Committee

7. Qualitative Analysis of the Election

Participation:

As previously mentioned, the 2021 elections saw a low turnout of 43.54%. The decrease in participation signifies a continuation to the trend surrounding Iraqi elections, in which election turnout consistently declines from election to another. For instance, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, the turnout was slightly higher than the 2021 elections, at 44.5% while the 2014 legislative elections saw higher participation of approximately 60% (Jiyad, 2021; Elhashimi, 2014).

Out of 18 provinces, only three had a turnout rate of more than 50%: Duhok (58.86%), Erbil (50.80%) and Salahuddin (50.76%), respectively. It is also important to note that the capital, Baghdad, which was split into 17 electoral districts divided between the two sections of the capital, Al-Karkh and Al-Rasafah, saw the lowest percentage of participation at 33.88% (IHEC, 2021). These figures reflect the lack of enthusiasm Iraqis have regarding elections and the overall system of governance.

Competition:

108 parties, 21 coalitions and 789 independent candidates competed over the CoR's 329 seats. Of them, only 33 parties and coalitions along with 43 independents were able to win seats at the CoR.

The decrease in the number of parties represented in the CoR, from 36 (2018 elections) to 33 (2021 elections), can be attributed to the changes in the electoral law. First, unlike the 2018 elections which adopted the division of the country into 18 provincial electoral districts and used a Modified Sainte-Laguë method with an initial divisor of 1.7 (Sowell, 2017, para.4), the 2021 elections adopted “medium-sized” electoral districts that divided the country into 83 districts. Second, the new electoral law that introduced a new electoral system based on the SNTV method, thereby changing the vote counting process to a first-past-the-post competition between candidates (Jiyad, 2021).

The third contributing factor concerns the protest movement of 2019. The rise of the “Tishreen” movement signified a domestic popular opposition to the established parties that rose to prominence in the previous elections (Alkinani, 2021). This sense of popular disenchantment vis-a-vis traditional political entities, paired with the change in the electoral law, also led to the increase of the number of seats won by independents to 43, up from less than 4 in the 2018 elections. Voters got the impression that members of political parties will put the interest of their party over the interest of the general public (Al-Jaff, 2021). Thus, more people voted for independents rather than large alliances and coalitions. However, the rise of independents in the CoR can also be understood as an attempt by “traditional” parties to deceive voters into voting for them (Alkinani, 2021).

Transparency:

Generally, the 2021 elections were fairer and more transparent than previous elections. These elections did not witness attempts to “erase” votes, exemplified by the burning of ballots warehouses prior to the manual recount that occurred in 2018 (El-Ghobashy & Salim, 2018). Nevertheless, the fairness of the elections was questioned several times. Less than a month prior to the elections, the IHEC announced that it had disqualified five candidates for “committing violations such as funnelling public money into their campaigns and promoting false allegations” (Salih, 2021: para.7).

After the announcement of the results, parties and coalitions, mainly Iran-aligned alliances, who were among the biggest losers in the elections quickly accused the IHEC and the government of Al-Kadhimi of election fraud. The losing parties presented more than a thousand appeals to the IHEC to recount the votes (Abdul-Zahra, 2021). Furthermore, after the official announcement of the final results by the IHEC, losing parties went to the Federal Supreme Court and claimed that due to “irregularities” the court should abstain from ratifying the election results. The court rejected their appeals and announced the ratification of the results in December, two months after the elections were held (Aljazeera, 2021).

It is also important to note that regarding campaign financing, candidates are not legally required to adhere to a set limit on campaign spending. Although the CoR passed in 2015 a law aimed at organizing parties, the law did not address the sources of funding for parties and their campaigns (Al-Dabbagh, 2021). Therefore, according to Ahmed Hama Rasheed, member of the financial parliamentary committee, some political alliances spent almost 150 million US dollars on their campaigns (Al-Dabbagh, 2021: para. 12).

Representation and Debate:

Most parties in Iraq are strongly controlled by their leadership. Hence, arguably no aspects of internal democracy like debates were held within Iraqi parties prior to the elections. Some parties are formed around a religious political leader such as the Sadrist Bloc which was formed around Sayyed Muqtada Al-Sadr, and Al-Hikma Movement (The National Wisdom Movement) which was formed around Sayyed Ammar Al-Hakim. In these instances, the cleric is in control of all members of his party or coalition, and his decisions are often not up for discussion from the members of the party. On the other hand, some parties hold periodical party conferences in which party members elect their leadership. However, in most cases, these conferences are performative acts that hold no real change in power dynamics within the party. For instance, the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) 14th conference led to the sixth reelection of Masoud Barzani as leader of the party and elected his nephew, and president of the Regional Government of Kurdistan (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, along with Masoud's son, Masrouf Barzani, as the two vice presidents of the KDP (Baban, 2022).

As for campaigning, the new electoral law made it more possible for voters to get to know individual candidates instead of party lists. Adopting 83 "medium-sized" constituencies rather than the 18 large-sized districts used in the previous elections made it more possible for candidates to run on programs relevant to their cities and towns rather than running on provincewide campaigns. Hence, this provided voters with the opportunity to efficiently engage with candidates' programs and campaigns. which, in turn, led to a reduced number of campaigns compared to previous elections. Large scale campaigns that target entire provinces indiscriminately were not practical in the 2021 elections (Amin, 2021). Alternatively, some candidates based their campaign on socio-political issues. Such Sunni Arab Alliances as the Speaker of the CoR Mohammed Al-Halbousi's Taqaddum Alliance (National Progress Alliance) and Khamis Al-Khanjar's Azem Alliance focused on their campaigns on the internally displaced Sunni Arabs from provinces previously controlled by ISIS, promising to work towards facilitating their return to their home cities (Al-Tarfi, 2021).

Openness:

Due to the context of the 2019 protest movement in which the elections were held in, the 2021 elections were more open than previous elections. Although the Sadrists' victory was expected before the election due to their previous gains in the 2018 elections (Loveluck & Salim, 2021), the elections proved to be unpredictable. Among the most surprising events was the immense losses suffered by Iran-aligned coalitions. Al-Fateh Alliance, which mostly consisted of political wings of militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), was among the largest losers. The coalition, which came in second place in the 2018 elections with a total of 48 seats, lost more than two thirds of their seats in the 2021 elections. In addition to Al-Fateh Alliance, the Alliance of National State Forces arguably suffered the worst loss of seats in the 2021 elections. The alliance, which was formed between former Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi's Al-Nasr (Victory) Alliance with cleric Ammar Al-Hakim's Al-Hikma Movement, entered the election with 62 seats at the CoR. However, they lost more than 90% of their share of seats in the 2021 elections, bringing them down to 4.

The openness of the elections was also showcased by the rise of movements with affinity to or affiliations with the Tishreen protest movement such as Emtidad (Extension/Continuation) Movement that was able to win 9 seats in the CoR. Another surprising aspect of elections was the large number of independent candidates that won seats in the parliament. Compared to the 2018 elections, the number of independent members of the CoR increased by 860%. This was largely due to the adoption of the new election law that gave an opportunity for candidates to further communicate and connect with local voters.

Significance:

The significance of the elections can be observed through its background. It was held a year before its scheduled date under the pretext of the protest movement that erupted in 2019. This election also witnessed significant modifications and changes to the country's electoral law. It was the first election after the adoption of the SNTV voting method and change in the electoral law.

Arguably, this election was also the first in which Iran did not have a direct contact to impose pressure on Iraqi political figures. That is mainly due to the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Maj. Gen. Qassim Soleimani along with deputy Chief of the PMF, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis in early 2020. The impact of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis' deaths can be examined through the sense of uncertainty that engulfed Iran-aligned coalitions (Alkinani, 2022). The absence of these two figures that had wide acceptance among Iran-backed factions exacerbated internal disputes between them. Relations among the factions were

left without an effective binding party trusted by all (Salem, 2021). The results of these unresolved internal disputes can be seen during the elections through Kataib Hezbollah's Huqooq (Rights) Movement's attempt to challenge Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq's Al-Sadiqun (The Honest) Bloc, by running against them in several districts (Knights, 2021). Hence, the unorganized Iran-aligned coalitions were swept under the organized wave of the Sadrists Bloc, which ran on a national, anti-Iranian platform.

8. Consequences and Impact on the Political System

The relative electoral victory of the Sadrists – and to a lesser extent, independent candidates – did not guarantee their control of the CoR. As pointed out by several experts, winning the election is not sufficient to be able to exercise political influence at CoR because, as per the aforementioned parliamentary procedure, the largest bloc – this time, the Sadrists with 73 seats – needed to negotiate to form a government (Mansour & Stewart-Jolley, 2021; Stewart-Jolley, 2021). Forming a government is particularly difficult in Iraq as the largest bloc often fails to swiftly reach an agreement of cooperation with other parties to form a government. In fact, in the past elections, it took 290 days (2010 elections), 131 days (2014 elections) and 143 days (2018 elections) for the government to be formed, creating a power vacuum as well as instigating inter- and intra- group conflicts within the central political authority. The October 2021 elections are no exception to this: it took 382 days for the new government to be formed on 27 October 2022.

9. International Political Response

Before the elections, many foreign governments welcomed IHEC's preparations, a move interpreted as a way to legitimize the IHEC's election administration amidst the domestic political turmoil (as described in the "Background to the Elections" section). These foreign governments include the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. On 6 October 2021, they issued a joint statement stating that they "support the Iraqi government's efforts to ensure a safe, free, fair, and inclusive electoral environment for all Iraqis" (Government of the United Kingdom, 2021, para.6).

On the day of the elections, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and various foreign governments, such as the EU and Japan, provided election monitoring in response to the invitation by IHEC.

A few days after the elections, UN Security Council congratulated the people of Iraq. It stated that "the elections proceeded smoothly and featured significant technical and procedural improvements from previous Iraqi elections" (United

Nations, 2021, para.2). Additionally, UNAMI praised the successful conduct of the elections and gave a level of legitimacy (Alshamary, 2022). National governments worldwide also welcomed that the October 2021 elections were conducted peacefully. the US President stated, “we are pleased that the election days were largely conducted peacefully” (White House, 2021). Moreover, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement that “the Government of Japan welcomes the fact that the fifth elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives were held in a generally peaceful manner” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021, para.1). Furthermore, Chief Observer of the European Union’s Election Observation Mission to Iraq commented that “elections were technically well-managed, competitive, and the largely calm electoral campaigns enabled voters to make informed choices. Voting was largely peaceful and orderly, and voters were generally able to freely express their will” (European Union Election Observation Mission to Iraq 2021, 2022, para.3).

In spite of the external parties’ initially positive responses to the elections, however, the subsequent political deadlock in the parliament (described in the following section) led the UN Special Envoy to Iraq, Jeannine Hennis-Plasschaert, to warn the country’s political elite in May 2022 that “the streets are about to boil over” (Lederer, 2022, para.1).

Following the formation of the new government on 27 October 2022, the international community, among them UN, US and Japan, and Middle Eastern countries, including Iran and Turkey, welcomed it. For example, on 9 November 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian congratulated the re-appointment of Fuad Al-Husseini as Iraq’s foreign minister, stating that:

I hope to witness the deepening and expansion of mutual cooperation in line with the development and promotion of bilateral, regional and international relations during Your Excellency's new term in office. I wish you as well as the Iraqi government and people increasing successes and honors. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, 2022, para.1)

10. Parliamentary Progress after the Elections

At the end of December 2021, almost two months after the parliamentary elections, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq ratified the election results.¹⁰ In January 2022, in an essential step toward forming a new government, the first session of the CoR was convened, during which Mohamed Al-Halbousi, a Sunni Arab

¹⁰ Unhappy with the election results, some defeated forces opted for violence, including the assassination attempts on high-profile political figures. These assassination attempts include ones targeting Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi on 7 November 2021 and the newly re-elected speaker of the Council of Representative Mohamed Al-Halbousi on 25 January 2022.

and the leader of the Taqaddum party, was re-elected for a second term as Speaker of the CoR. However, soon after the re-election of Al-Halbousi, the CoR faced political gridlock.

As per the aforementioned parliamentary procedure stipulated by the constitution, the next step was the president's nomination and election, whose seat is informally reserved by a Kurd. However, the two major Kurdish parties – KDP and PUK – who usually agree on the presidential nominee without major dispute, failed for the first time to agree on whom to nominate due to deep division between them. The tradition has been that KDP dominates the political leadership of the Kurdistan region while PUK names the country's President. Nevertheless, this time KDP was aiming to take the presidency by nominating Kurdistan Regional Government interior minister Reber Ahmed, while PUK picks the incumbent president, Barham Salih, as a presidential nominee.

The enmity over the nomination and election of the president is not confined to the inter-Kurd group rivalry. The presidential vote at CoR, which needs at least a two-thirds attendance for realisation, were boycotted by major Shi'a parties several times, the first time by the Sadrists and the second and third times by the Coordination Framework (Middle East Policy Council, 2022). Being stuck with the process of presidential elections, the leader of the largest bloc Muqtada Al-Sadr and his loyalists formed a tripartite alliance – named the Save the Homeland Alliance – with KDP and the Sunni Sovereignty Alliance to create a majority government. By forming the Save the Homeland Alliance, Sadr sought to exclude his political enemy, the Coordination Framework, from the national government. However, his effort to create a majority government without the Coordination Framework failed in the face of their strong opposition. Amid the long-lasting parliamentary deadlock, Sadr decided to withdraw Sadrists MPs from the political process *en masse* in June 2022, creating the space for the Coordination Framework to form a government (Chalak, 2022).¹¹ The vacant CoR seats were quickly replaced by the October 2021 elections' second runner-ups in accordance with the legislation. In many cases, Coordination Framework members occupied these seats (Bobseine, 2022a). The resulting configuration of CoR seats looked as follows, which is still valid as of February 2023:

¹¹ According to one report, the aim of Sadr's withdrawal from the political process was to "embarras[s] the Shia Coordination Framework and embroil them in a decisive confrontation on the street" (Elias, 2022, para.4).

Table 3: Seat distribution in the CoR after the resignation of the Sadrist Bloc

Party/Coalition	Number of Seats	Gains/Losses
Tagaddum/National Progress Alliance	39	+2
State of Law Coalition	38	+5
KDP	31	0
Fateh Alliance	30	+13
Kurdistan Alliance/PUK	17	0
Emtidad (Extension/Continuation) Movement	16	+7
Azem (Determination) Alliance	14	0
Alliance of National State Forces	11	+7
New Generation Movement	9	0
National Contract Alliance	8	+4
Ishraqat Kanoon (The Glow of Kanoon)	7	+1
Tasmeem (Resolve) Coalition	7	+2
Huqooq (Rights) Movement	6	+5
Babylonians Movement	4	0
National Approach Alliance	3	+2
Hasem (Decisive) Movement for Reform	3	0
Our Masses are our Identity Alliance	3	0
Al Furatain (The Two Rivers) Movement	3	+2
Parties and Coalitions with one seat each	22	+5
Independents	58	+15
Total	329	-

Source: The Iraqi Council of Representatives (not dated). Edited by the authors.

The Coordination Framework's subsequent move to create an anti-Sadrist government, including their announcement to designate Mohammed Al-Sudani as a candidate for prime minister, led to an escalation of tensions between the two sides. The feud included Sadrist protestors' storming the parliament twice on 27 and 30 July and the following sit-in protest in the parliamentary building to delay the Coordination Frameworks' attempt to form a new government as well as the Coordination Framework's counter-protest on 1 August ("Iraqi protesters storm parliament for second time", 2022; "Iraqi protesters storm the parliament", 2022; "Tensions soar", 2022). The Sadr supporters' sit-in protests, which were later moved from inside to outside the parliamentary building, continued for almost one month.

In early August, amidst the escalating political instability, Sadr demanded the dissolution of the parliament without the formation of a new government and early elections ("Iraq's al-Sadr demands", 2022). His demand should be understood in the context that such a move would keep the current electoral system, including the electoral law and the electoral committee, intact. It was under this particular system that the Sadrist Movement became the largest bloc in the CoR following the October 2021 elections. Hence, in Sadr's perspective, dissolving the parliament (from which Sadrist MPs withdrew in June) before the Coordination Framework-led government is formed was crucial. That is because by preserving the status-quo,

he can maintain the status quo of the electoral system which works in his favor.¹² That is arguably why the Sadrists filed a lawsuit to the Federal Supreme Court to dissolve the parliament – before the new government is formed. However, his attempts failed as the court stated that it does not have constitutional authority to do so (Bobseine, 2022a). On the contrary, for the Coordination Framework who lost numerous parliamentary seats under the new electoral system, the formation of a new government under its ally, Al-Sudani, would be a step ahead to amend the electoral system to a one favorable to them (Bobseine, 2022b).

The parliamentary feud spilled over Iraqi streets: On 29 August, violent street clashes between Sadr supporters and armed groups aligned with the Coordination Framework occurred in Baghdad and southern part of the country, leaving more than 30 casualties (Bobseine, 2022a). Following these incidents, Sadr made an announcement that he would “resign” from Iraqi politics (Bobseine, 2022c).¹³

Amid the demise of Sadr’s influence at CoR, the month of October witnessed a significant step forward toward the formation of a new government. On 13 October, CoR could finally meet the two-third quorum to be able to vote the country’s president, and elected Abdul Latif Rashid (a Kurd), marking an end of the year-long parliamentary deadlock to elect a new president following the October 2021 elections.¹⁴ President Rashid then named Al-Sudani, Coordination Framework’s nominee, as prime minister who is tasked to form a new government within 30 days. On 15 October, as expected, Sadr expressed that he would refuse to join a new government, paving a further way for the Coordination Framework to consolidate its influence in the new government. On 27 October, the new government, headed by Prime Minister Al-Sudani, was formed 382 days after the election.¹⁵ On 27 March 2023, the Coordination Framework-led government voted in favor for the “House of Representatives and Provincial and District Councils Electoral Law” which abolishes the SNTV-based electoral law, which led to their heavy defeat in the 2021 elections, to restore the controversial Modified Sainte-Laguë method. Hence, the parliamentary political power balance, which was once in favor of the Sadrist Movement, is now increasingly inclining toward the Coordination Framework (Al-Khazraji, 2023).

¹² That is why his tripartite alliance with KDP and the Sunni Sovereign Alliance formally ended following their affirmation that in September that a new government should be formed before holding early elections (Bobseine, 2022a).

¹³ It should be noted, however, that Sadr made such an announcement several times in the past, yet arguably the Sadrists continued their political activity (Bobseine, 2022c).

¹⁴ For details of intra-Kurd fight over the presidency, see Saeed (2022).

¹⁵ For an analysis of the post-government formation parliamentary dynamics, see Hassan (2023).

Conclusion

The October 2021 elections did not go against the major electoral trends that Iraq saw in previous elections: low voter turnout and delayed government formation. The lowest turnout of 43.54% since the country's first elections in 2005 as well as 382 days of government formation, a period longer than the previous elections (e.g., 290 days after 2010 elections, 131 days after 2014 elections and 143 days after 2018 elections) signify disbelief among the Iraqi population towards the parliamentary politics.

The elections also witnessed major differences from the past elections. These are exemplified by the enforcement of the new electoral law that introduced SNTV system and the relative victory of independent candidates, whose triumph is largely thanks to the new electoral law. These changes initially led to the emergence of the Sadrist Movement as the largest political bloc at the CoR, only to see its demise following the parliamentary deadlock. The Sadrist Movement's withdrawal *en masse* from the CoR in June 2022 allowed the Coordination Framework to regain its political grip in the CoR, leading to the formation of the Coordination Framework-led new government in October 2022. The months following the formation of the new government was characterized by the Coordination Framework's attempts to restore its political power, exemplified by the abolishment of the new electoral law. As such, the post-election period saw the shifting of power balance twice, once towards the Sadrist Movement and the second towards the Coordination Framework.

Prior to the October 2021 elections, the Iraqis went out to the streets to demand changes in the country's political systems, among them the electoral system. However, following the legitimate elections and the following lengthy government formation period, what they saw was the return to the status quo of the pre-Tishreen movement: the dominance of Iran-backed political entities both at the CoR and the government. The Coordination Framework's ongoing attempts to consolidate political power to undermine the influence of the Tishreen Movement may lead to the spark of another large-scale anti-government street protest movement. This, in turn, would perpetuate the cycle of political chaos and instability in Iraq.

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