

Rise of Sadr: on Iraq's government formation

Iraq's parliamentary election results marked a [remarkable comeback for Muqtada al-Sadr](#), the nationalist Shia cleric who for years had been sidelined both by the Iraqi establishment and its Iranian backers and was seen as an enemy by the Americans. The May 12 parliamentary vote was crucial for all the main blocs in Iraq. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who led the Victory Alliance, bet on the gains the Iraqi army made under his leadership in the war against the Islamic State to win political points. For the Al-Fatih bloc, a coalition of parties and leaders that have close ties with Iran, capturing power was important at a time when Iran is facing new regional challenges, and they ran a largely pro-Shia campaign. Mr. Sadr, on the other side, shed his early sectarian image, focussed his campaign on social justice and government failure, attacked Iran's deepening influence in Iraq from a nationalist perspective and stitched up alliances with liberals and communists to expand his base. This strategy paid off, with Mr. Sadr's Sairoon bloc emerging as the largest coalition in the 329-member Iraqi parliament, with 54 seats. Mr. Abadi's alliance came third with 42 seats while the pro-Iranian bloc secured 47. Mr. Sadr's surprise success suggests that the cross-sectarian narrative he put forward in a divided Iraq, that is yet to recover from the wounds of the U.S. occupation and the war against the IS, is gaining popularity. While it is certainly a good sign for the future of Iraq, it may not be easy for Mr. Sadr to turn his electoral performance into a lasting political victory.

Since no bloc has absolute majority, a new government will have to be formed through political negotiation. Mr. Sadr himself cannot become Prime Minister as he did not contest the election. But it is not clear whether his bloc could get the prime ministerial berth at all. Iran would be wary of Mr. Sadr's rise, as he is critical of its interventions in Iraq. Mr. Sadr had visited Saudi Arabia last year in what was widely seen as an effort to strike a balance between the two regional powerhouses. He has demanded that the Iran-trained popular mobilisation militias, which were in the forefront of the fight against the IS, be merged with the Iraqi national army. Besides, his nationalist narrative runs counter to the cross-border Shia brotherhood that Tehran is trying to promote in order to gain regional influence. However, despite the bad blood between them, both sides could also find some common ground in rebuilding post-war Iraq. It is not in Iran's interest to see Iraq become dysfunctional again, triggering further chaos and breeding more violent militant groups. Iraq is a complex multi-sect society that needs cross-sectarian politics in order to be stable. Mr. Sadr's broad-based politics offers hope in this. Mr. Abadi has already offered support for a peaceful transition of power. If Iran doesn't play spoilsport, Iraq could get a government soon.

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