

Sadr's Retirement: A Good Omen for Iran?

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Amidst the political turmoil and stalemate, the head of Iraq's largest parliamentary party, Muqtada Al-Sadr, announced his retirement from politics. The move came after the failure in government's formation in post-October 2021 elections and triggered after Sadr's supporters stormed the parliament in August 2022. As Sadr has now seemingly quit the politics, the groups aligned with Iran have found space to exert their influence across the political spectrum which could ultimately help Iran in reviving its role inside Iraq which, to an extent, was subsided after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani.

October 2021 Elections and Bloc Formation

The early elections in October 2021 were called after years of mass protests by Sadr and his supporters, especially in 2019. The Sadrist movement announced country-wide protests on nationalistic narratives. Two popular demands by the Sadrist movement were to firstly, abolish the existing political setup which was based on ethnic and religious grounds, and secondly to the expulsion of all foreign forces stationed inside Iraq.¹ Such demands were unacceptable for the Iranian-backed political factions. Therefore, despite securing the largest number of seats in 2018 parliamentary elections and forming an alliance with the other parties, Sadr was unable to form a government. In 2018 formation of the government was largely seen as a triumph for Iranian-backed Fatah Party and State of the Law Coalition.² Consequently, the protests by Sadr's supporters and the persistent deadlock that

continued for nearly 3 years (2019 – 2021) led to the early parliamentary elections in 2021.

Eventually the parliamentary elections were scheduled for October 2021 under 'Single Non-Transferable Vote' system. The system allowed the voters to elect multiple candidates for a district on preferential basis.³ The results of October elections further strengthened Sadr's position while weakening the Fatah Party. Not only Sadr managed to secure 73 seats but after making alliances with the Sunni and Kurdish parties, he emerged as the leader of the leading bloc in the parliament. Turkey played a vital role in bringing Iraq's 2 Sunni political parties under a common banner. Al-Takaddum Movement led by Al-Halbousi which secured 37 seats (making it the second largest) joined hands with Al-Azm Alliance of Khamis Al-Khanjer with 14 seats and other independent Sunni lawmakers to form 'Al-Siyada Coalition' with a total of 67 seats.⁴ Similarly, Sadr also managed to form an alliance with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with 31 seats, hence completing the cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic tripartite.

To counter Sadr's alliance, the Shi'ite parties of Iraq amassed their lawmakers around Nouri Al-Maliki (former PM and a pro-Iran politician) to form 'Coordination Framework'. Maliki's State of the Law Coalition with 33 seats joined hands with Fatah Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) having 17 seats each along with Christians' Babylon Movement with 4 seats.⁵ CF also included other notable Shi'ite politicians namely former PM Haider Al-Abadi, Qais Al-Khazali (head of the pro-Iran armed group, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq), Faleh Al Fayyad (current chairman of Iran-backed Popular

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Mobilization Force) and Ammar Al-Hakim (leader of the Hikmah Movement). Right after the election results were announced, CF mobilised their support towards the Green Zone of Baghdad, thereafter, reflecting their apprehensions towards the elections transparency. The 2 months long protests were called off after the Iraqi court gave the verdict in favour of the previously announced results. However, tensions between the Sadrist movement and CF prevailed over the formation of the government.

Failure to Form Government: An Aftermath

The Sadrist movement through its alliances with the Sunnis, the Kurds and other smaller parties, convened the parliamentary session on March 26, 2022 for the nomination of presidential and prime ministerial candidates. Nevertheless, the coalition, in total, could secure 202 votes out of 329, i.e., less than two-third (220) of the votes required for the election of the president and the PM.⁶ On the other hand, CF was also unable to form a government considering the lack of required lawmakers in its camp. Eventually, the scenario that emerged was that of cooperation and negotiation meant to bring the two camps closer to each other. However, Sadrist movement and Shi'ite parties of CF eventually failed to unanimously agree on the presidential and PM candidates owing to the sharp differences in their ideologies. While the Sadrists were more focused on nationalistic grounds, other Shi'ite parties were adamant to uphold the Shi'ite supremacy inside Iraq. Consequently, after months of political deadlock and inability to field his preferential candidates for presidency and premiership, Sadr, amidst sheer frustration, directed his lawmakers to resign from their seats in June 2022.

Ultimately, the 73 seats which were vacated following the resignations from the Sadrist lawmakers were distributed to the candidates of CF who came second in their constituencies. State of the Law Coalition gained 4 new seats while Fatah Party increased their total number to 29 seats, thus bringing the total seats of CF to 130, i.e., the largest bloc in the parliament.⁷ The resignation of Sadrist lawmakers meant that the tripartite alliance also disintegrated. This allowed the CF to reach out to other parties, especially Al-Azm Party in Sunni coalition, to cooperate on government's formation. The resignations where on one hand served as an opportunity for the CF, they also created a dilemma as various Shi'ite leaders of the framework could not agree on any one name for the premiership. Maliki staunchly favoured the strengthening of the CF to form a powerful government while other leaders voiced for a transitional setup that could bring political reforms for the next elections.⁸ However, as a compromise, CF finally agreed on the name of Mohammed Al-Sudani for the premiership.

Political Turbulence and Clashes

The nomination of Sudani was met with fierce resistance by the Sadrist movement and followers who accused him of the replica of Maliki. Sudani was considered to be close to Iran and had served as minister for human rights during Maliki's second term (i.e., 2010-2014). As a result, Sadr's followers stormed into the parliament's building demanding the withdrawal of Sudani's candidacy. Due to the persistent occupancy of the parliament by Sadr's followers, the session for electing the premier got postponed. The clashes between Sadr's followers and the security forces remained limited to not only Baghdad but also spread in the Southern city of Basra where they led to many casualties. Eventually, the



incumbent PM, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, had to convene a 'National Dialogue' to resolve the political crisis. The dialogue consisted of CF leaders, KDP and Al-Siyada. Nonetheless, since Sadrist lawmakers were absent owing to their resignations and CF continued to assert its supremacy, KDP and Al-Siyada refused to participate in the 'National Dialogue' process, hence, halting the quest for a breakthrough.⁹ Amidst the political chaos, Sadr announced his retirement from politics to minimise the intensity of the clashes. Sadr's retirement seems to favour Iran as the vacuum is expected to be filled by pro-Iran factions.

Options for Iran

Sadr's retirement from politics featured three prevalent reasons, i.e., inability to form government, violent clashes, and the religious decree of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Kadhim Al-Haeri. Haeri is the religious successor of Grand Ayatollah Baqir Al-Sadr (uncle and father-in-law of Muqtada Al-Sadr). After the assassination of his uncle and father, Grand Ayatollah Sadeq Al-Sadr, Haeri became the religious leader for Muqtada and his Sadrist movement. Haeri, who now lives in Iran, announced his retirement as a religious authority and directed his followers to conform to Iran's Supreme Leader, Sayyid Ali Khamenei, in religious duties.¹⁰ The announcement not only strengthened Iran but also made Muqtada realise its religious vulnerability. In Shi'ite Islam, a religious authority is the highest position that entails religious, spiritual, social, economic, and to an extent, political influence. Haeri's support for Khamenei clearly indicated his displeasure from Sadr's politics and stepping down as a religious authority was tantamount to weakening Sadr. Predicting his vulnerability, Sadr resigned from politics as a consequence of Haeri's immense influence on Sadrists.

Apparently, it seems that Iran is the greatest beneficiary as the major obstacle in its way in Iraq, i.e., Sadr has now quit the politics. Nevertheless, Sadr's announcement was followed by violent clashes in southern districts, particularly Basra, hence, further instigating the intra-Shi'ite divisions. For Iran, unity amongst the Iraqi Shi'ites is the primary aim. Iran has only managed to mark its influence inside Iraq after the Shi'ite-majority government was formed in post-Saddam period. Therefore, intra-Shi'ite divisions would mean that Iran's role in the country would be challenged. It is also evident from the fact that Iranian role inside Iraq remained unaffected even during the civil war in 2007 and rise of ISIS in 2011-onwards, however, it only faced difficulties when the Shi'ite groups started competing with each other for power. This resulted in a vacuum which was filled by non-Shi'ite entities like KDP and Sunni Alliance, hence, paving way for other regional actors to step in. KDP alliance with the US is long-standing owing to the latter's support to Kurds while Sunni Alliance extracts its support from Turkey and GCC.

Conclusively, for Iran, a merely Sadr's resignation is not effective, instead, reuniting the Shi'ite bloc is inevitable. Utilising Haeri's decree in its own favour reflects Iran's strength in one aspect but the ultimate policy should be to initiate the political dialogue amongst various Shi'ite factions. In this regard, three major steps are substantial. First, Iran must utilise its political and financial leverage over the PMF to address the grievances of Sadr, i.e., to integrate PMF in Iraq's state structure under proper rules and regulations. Second, Iran must increase its outreach to the religious establishment of Najaf. No matter how powerful Iranian role could become, the majority of Iraqis still consider Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani as their religious authority over the clergy of Iran. Therefore, Iran must hold

meetings with Iraqi clergy in order to curb down the political tensions. Third, Iran should adopt the policy of inclusivity, i.e., by fostering ties with non-Shi'ite factions as well. Although Iran has working relations with PUK and Al-Khanjer, yet they present the minority faction within the non-Shi'ite political groups. To effectively raise its status amongst the Iraqi

political elites, Iran options requires to reach out to KDP and Al-Halbousi. The only way to prevent Iraq from becoming a geopolitical battleground and a crumbling state lies in introducing political and economic reforms, which hinges on national consensus among the political elites of the country.

Notes and References

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