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SHIA FACTIONS IN THE IRAQI ELECTION: DIVIDED AND IN DISARRAY

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Iraq's parliamentary elections, scheduled for 12 May 2018, will serve as the first national referendum since the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in 2017. Observers of the lead-up to the elections will invariably examine the sectarian Shia versus Sunni rivalries during the process, to the neglect of the intra-sectarian Shia rivalries that have evolved since 2003. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Shia factions did run on a single ticket, the United Iraqi Alliance. As of 2018, there are at least five different Shia factions all vying for the coveted post of Iraq's Prime Minister.

In the lead-up to the 2018 vote, Iraq's rival Shia coalitions appear to be extremely divided into a number of actors, whose agendas and priorities are often divergent.

Among the main competitors in these elections, incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi will run for reelection as the head of the "Victory of Iraq" (Nasr al-Iraq) bloc, whose name clearly capitalises on the Iraqi

victory over IS. One of his main rivals, former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, is also seeking a political comeback since stepping down in 2014, leading the "State of Law" (Dawlat al-Qanun) coalition, using the name he came up with during the 2010 electoral campaign. Both al-Abadi and al-Maliki were politicians from the Dawa Party, a party that had united during Iraq's first elections in 2005, and, later on, split around loyalty to two political personalities rather than to an ideological divide.

In addition, the Shia militias from the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) have fielded candidates in the "Conquest" (al-Fatih) bloc; most prominent among them is Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organisation. The PMUs running in elections, however, represents a controversial element; even though the candidates resigned from their militia posts to run in the elections, they will maintain informal connections to their military units, some of which are deeply connected to Iran.

Another component of the Shia bloc is the Hikma (“Wisdom”) coalition, led by the cleric Ammar al-Hakim, who formerly led the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Both al-Ameri and al-Hakim split away from ISCI (formerly named as “Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI), which, like al-Dawa, was one of the two major Shia exile parties that came to Iraq after 2003, and have both suffered from splits and factionalism since then.

Finally, the Sadrists, followers of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, announced a joint list with the Iraqi Communist Party, an anomalous example of Islamists uniting with an established secular party. Amongst the Shia political factions, the Sadrists are the only group not exiled under the Baath, as they formed after 2003 amongst the Shia who endured during the rule of Saddam Hussein.

While not considered a “Shia” faction, the National coalition (al-Wataniyya) is led by Ayad Allawi, a Shia himself, but he has brandished his secular credentials and has managed in the past to garner support from Iraqi Sunnis as a less divisive leader who could be accepted as Prime Minister.

Against this background, going into the elections, it seems to be clear that none of these coalitions will garner enough votes to form a majority in Iraq’s 328-seat parliament, which will mean that bargaining and alliance formation among the coalitions will ensue after the vote.

THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER

What seems to be sure is that the next Iraqi Prime Minister will have to face several challenges. On the one hand, if al-Abadi’s coalition is able to negotiate that the incumbent Prime Minister would serve a

second term, the outcome may probably appease Iraq Arab Sunnis, who perceive him as a less sectarian leader than others. At the same time, however, a second term for al-Abadi might risk upsetting the Kurds, who opposed his rejectionist stance on Kurdish independence. On the other, if Nuri al-Maliki were to make a comeback and become Prime Minister by forming the largest coalition, that outcome would largely upset Arab Sunnis, who perceive him as sectarian and associate him with the conditions that allowed IS to emerge in the first place.

Also, if the Shia militia faction were to fare well in the elections, and if al-Ameri were able to become Prime Minister, this would be difficult to accept for most other competitors. The rise of the al-Fatih coalition would indeed upset both the Arab Sunnis, due to their tensions with the Shia militias in the past, and the Kurds, due to the tense relationship between Shia and Kurdish militias during the campaign against ISIS.

As for the Hikma coalition and the Sadrist-Communist alliance, these are not likely to garner as many votes as the first three actors, based on past electoral outcomes. Nonetheless, they may tip the balance in favor of one of the three coalitions, thus becoming kingmakers. However, the Sadrists have had a troubled past with al-Maliki and are unlikely to support his bid to become premier again.

Finally yet importantly, it must be outlined that any negotiations after the elections will have to factor in the role of Iran, which will be a powerful arbiter during this process. Iran would favor either al-Maliki or al-Ameri over al-Abadi, since the former two have had closer relations with Teheran, whereas al-Abadi has tried to balance Iraq’s foreign

relations with Saudi Arabia and the US, Iran's rivals in the region.

After 2010 and 2014, the formation of a cabinet took months, and at the time there were just two to three dominant Shia

factions. Today, and regardless of the outcome, the fractured nature of the Shia political elite seems to indicate, once again, that the government formation process will be long and arduous.