
Factors Shaping Future Complications in Iraqi Domestic Politics

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As Iraq's provincial council elections draw near, the remaining days carry heightened political and security sensitivity. Even in the absence of major disruptions and with the elections unfolding as scheduled, Iraq is poised for a transformative phase. Amidst the broader Middle East context and Iraq's internal dynamics, at least six factors indicate that the upcoming year is likely to be fraught with political tension. The conflict between the Coordination Framework and Sadr, the tension between Islamic Resistance groups and the government, the repercussions of the Gaza war intertwined with international politics, alongside the complexities of the Kurdish and Sunni situations, collectively pose potential catalysts for fresh challenges in Iraq.

Dynamics of Shiite Internal Conflict

In the lead-up to the elections, two prevailing Shiite internal conflicts stand out as significant factors shaping the country's political trajectory and potential sources of future tensions in Iraq. One centers on the rivalry between the Coordination Framework groups and Sadr, while the other stems from internal divisions within the Islamic Resistance groups.

Sadr's call for an election boycott clashes with the Coordination Framework groups, which view the upcoming elections as a crucial opportunity for preparing for the parliamentary elections. This extends beyond a mere political dispute, manifesting as factional clashes in certain areas. Tensions have flared in Basra, Maysan, and parts of Baghdad. While Najaf may be shielded from internal Shiite tensions due to Ayatollah Sistani's influence, analogous tensions could potentially arise in various other southern Iraq locations, including Dhi Qar.

The potential victory of Maliki's list or the prospect of former Sadrists from Ahl al-Haq securing the governor's post may undermine Sadr's influence. Yet, in contrast to the notion that the election could definitively shape the balance of power in Shiite politics, the conflict is poised to transition into a new phase.

A group of young leaders, aged 46-53, coupled with the vulnerability of traditional figures within the Shiite community, is poised to endure for years. Consequently, sooner or later, Sadr is likely to take to the streets again if an agreement is not reached. While the use of the name "Iraqi Islamic Resistance" initially suggested unity among its constituent groups, it later became evident that the behavior of those inside the government differed from that of others like Hezbollah and Nujaba outside the government. This doesn't appear to be merely a tactic to absolve the government from any actions they take against the United States.

Some leaders within these groups are likely drawn to the prospect of positioning themselves as the new leader of the Islamic Resistance. This appeal is particularly evident now as figures like Qais al-Khazali or Hadi al-Amiri find themselves compelled to focus on protecting the government they have established. Furthermore, they are inclined to avoid leaving the arena of opposition to the United States exclusively to Sadr. Certainly, as attacks against the United States persist, these groups are increasingly prone to conflict with the Sudan's government. Moreover, armed groups are likely to seek political achievements from their anti-American endeavors, further weakening the Sudan's cabinet over time.

Another consideration involves voter turnout and the potential for protests. However, it is premature to determine whether participation in the southern provinces will be lower, given the distinct nature of these elections compared to those in 2021. There is competition at the local level in this election, which could be a reason for people to participate with political, social, and tribal motives. Yet the voices of those who boycott are not weak. However, if, as many now say, the turnout is lower than before, then it is not unrealistic to expect another wave of protests in the coming years.

legal and constitutional change

Following the Tishreen protests, the Iraqi parliament initiated a committee to amend the constitution. While it didn't yield success initially, it later became part of the Sudani's government's agenda, expected to present proposals by October of this year. However, October passed without the government delivering. The probable cause for the delay is disagreements among parties regarding the approach to implement changes, a matter likely to surface more prominently in the coming year.

The Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq secretary had highlighted approximately 60 constitution articles requiring modification. Other Shiite leaders advocate for constitutional changes in light of post-election issues and the ongoing disputes between Baghdad and Erbil. Notably, Fayege Zedan, the head of the judiciary, emerges as a key figure to monitor in understanding unfolding developments. Zedan, wielding significant powers in the judiciary, has evolved into a crucial player in Iraqi domestic politics, emphasizing the political necessity of constitutional amendments, and the primary justification stems from the recognition that political crises in the country can be triggered by constitutional restrictions. While there might not be significant opposition to modifying certain constitution articles in a general sense, there is apprehension about a potential gradual decentralization of power. As a result, concerns over reducing the powers of provincial councils, issues related to the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad, and the overall political system become critical. Without consensus on these matters, complications are likely to arise.

Regional politics and tensions with the United States

Another factor that adds complexity to the situation in Iraq is the ongoing regional conflicts and tensions with the United States. Thus far, the clashes between Shiite armed groups and the United States have been relatively controlled. However, the U.S. stance on the Gaza war has provided armed groups with a pretext to intensify efforts to withdraw the United States from Iraq. The persistent attacks by these groups could eventually lead to a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, potentially extending to Syria. Alternatively, it might escalate into a war between the United States and armed groups, necessitating the deployment of more troops, as currently has more than 10,000 along with contractors, in Syria and Iraq. In either scenario, the Iraqi government will be drawn into the conflict, inevitably complicating Iraq's domestic politics.

Adding to the complexity, the ongoing conflict in Gaza has the potential to escalate tension in both Iraq and Syria. Recent developments, including Putin's visit to the Gulf and China's Middle East policy, underscore the significance of energy security and the stability of Gulf countries for both China and Russia. China, a major consumer of Gulf oil, deployed six warships to the Middle East shortly after the conflict in Gaza. A Kremlin spokesperson revealed that Putin and Prince Mohammed bin Salman discussed the war and other sensitive regional issues. Concurrently, Raisi's visit to Moscow coincided with discussions on Sukhoi Su-35 aircraft, Russian helicopters, and Iranian ballistic missiles, marking a potential advancement in Russian-Iranian defense collaboration. Notably, the actions of the Houthis and pro-Iranian groups in the region align with a broader strategy that cannot overlook the interests of China and Russia.

Kurds and Sunnis

The budgetary dispute between the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad is no longer just about oil and financial matters. Even the prospect of resolving issues related to oil and finance, including the issuance of loans, has given rise to significant challenges. The government implements a debt policy to prevent significant harm to the Kurdistan Regional Government while actively playing a role in sustaining the ongoing demonstrations in the Kurdistan Region.

This matter may also have direct implications for the upcoming Kurdistan parliamentary elections. It appears that the primary strategy of certain political groups in Baghdad is to delay parliamentary elections and, if held, to undermine the current dominance of the KDP in the government. The potential failure to conduct elections in February next year will intensify concerns about the legitimacy of KRG institutions. Amplifying legitimacy concerns alongside reviving budgetary issues could open the door for heightened political and legal interventions in the Kurdistan Region. If tensions persist between the PUK and KDP, it may foster a conducive environment for the success of this strategy.

Beyond the dynamics in the Kurdistan Region, the future role of former parliament speaker Mohammed Halbousi, coupled with the competition between parties vying for control of Anbar province, stands out as a crucial potential source of tension with implications for both domestic and foreign policy.

Iraq is at a turning point in its domestic and foreign policy. The Shiite internal conflict is entering a new phase. Just as Kurdish-Sunni relations in Baghdad are moving towards a new era after more than two decades. However, the situation in the Middle East and the world is changing. These can provide a glimpse of the situation in Iraq next year. However, if unilateral domestic and foreign policies are avoided, the situation could take a different turn.