

Election result in Iraq portends further political and social conflict

By James Cogan
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Iraq's election last Saturday was marked by mass disaffection, poor official organisation and allegations of outright vote-rigging. No grouping of parties has won anywhere near the support needed to form government in the 329-seat parliament.

Nationally, just 44.52 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, compared with turnouts of at least 60 percent in previous elections. In the capital Baghdad, participation barely reached 32 percent.

The outcome portends yet more political conflict in every region of Iraq, with class and social divisions emerging to the fore, after more than 15 years of devastation by the US and its allies.

Of the two million people forced from their homes since 2014 by the US-backed war against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as few as 300,000 were even registered. The provinces most affected by the war were those with significant Sunni Muslim populations, such as Anbar in the west and Nineveh in the northwest. Those areas saw some of the lowest participation rates in the election.

In the three provinces of the autonomous Kurdish Region and the province of Kirkuk, parties opposed to the dominant Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its alleged nepotism are complaining of fraud and demanding new elections or a vote recount. Police have been set on demonstrators and violence may escalate.

The Shiite coalition headed by outgoing US-backed Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, which had been predicted to win significant support, suffered a debacle. It won only 42 seats and will have to engage in weeks or even months of backroom negotiations to form a coalition that agrees to keep Abadi as prime minister.

A rival Shiite coalition headed by Nouri al-Maliki, who was pressured by Washington to resign as prime minister in 2014 after ISIS seized control of the

country's west and north, won just 25 seats.

The "Fatah" coalition headed by Hadi al-Amiri, won 47 seats to become the second-largest bloc in the parliament. Amiri heads the Badr Organisation, an Iranian-linked Shiite fundamentalist movement that gave the greatest support to the US occupation after 2003, alongside the PUK and other Kurdish nationalist parties.

Badr provided the personnel for US-trained Iraqi special forces death squads, which murdered tens of thousands of people suspected of opposing the occupation and supporting the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

From 2011-2012, Badr and other Shiite-based militias sent forces into Syria to fight alongside government troops against US-backed "rebels." After ISIS entered Iraq in 2014, Badr supplied many of the militiamen who fought alongside US and Iraqi government troops. Amiri's coalition won votes in the election, largely by promoting the role of its militia in defeating ISIS.

The largest bloc in the parliament, with 54 seats, will be the "Alliance of Revolutionaries for Reform." This highly unstable grouping is led by the Sadrist movement that follows bourgeois nationalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party (CP). It won solid support in the working-class suburbs and slums of Baghdad and other major cities.

The bloc is wracked by contradictions. The Iraqi CP, in line with its history of collaboration with imperialism, fully supported the 2003 US invasion and occupation. Sadr's movement, which has its main base of support in the poorest working-class areas of Baghdad, initially opposed it. In 2004, Sadr called for armed resistance and his Mahdi Army suffered heavy losses in pitched battles with American and British

forces in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Karbala, and other cities in the majority Shiite provinces of Iraq.

Sadr continued to verbally oppose the US occupation on Iraqi nationalist grounds but his movement turned to sectarian violence against Sunni-based forces in 2006. The Mahdi Army was blamed for some of the worst atrocities that forced a large proportion of the Sunni population of Baghdad to flee their homes into segregated cantons. After 2007, the Sadrists largely called off resistance and joined the jockeying for parliamentary power, including by taking ministries in the Shiite-dominated occupation governments at various times.

Sadr formed the alliance with the CP in 2016, based on seeking increased positions and privilege through common denunciations of the appalling poverty that faces the working class. Under conditions of growing US-Iranian tensions, Sadr also ramped up nationalist condemnations of Iran's influence over the Shiite parties of Iraq, accusing Tehran of seeking to take over the country and its resources.

Outgoing Prime Minister Abadi has indicated he is prepared to hold talks with the Sadrist bloc over the formation of a new regime. Fatah, however, has said it opposes any role in the government for parties like the CP that advance a nominally secular perspective. This stance appears to be intended more to pressure Abadi and other political groupings to exclude the Sadrists and their anti-Iranian position.

It is entirely conceivable that US agencies will respond by encouraging a bloc between Abadi, Maliki and the Sadrists. While Sadr is presented in the establishment media as "anti-American," he has demonstrated in the past his willingness to collaborate with the US to protect or advance the interests of the layer of the Shiite elite that he represents.

Under conditions in which the Trump administration has repudiated the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran and tensions are rising rapidly in the region, Washington may promote the Sadrists as a counterweight against Tehran's influence within Iraq.

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