Iraqis voted for a new parliament in the October 10 election, but it could be weeks or months before a viable new government takes office. This is why locals didn’t go dancing in the streets at all after the last election. Still, a healthy democratic process seems to have resulted in the best possible outcome, which nevertheless leaves most parties dissatisfied.

It was a free and fair election, the fifth since the aggressive US invasion, with all the necessary attributes. A new law came into force to increase the number of constituencies and allow for single-candidate voting instead of lists. Yes, there were boycotts from the younger generation, which remained skeptical and lost faith in the current system. There was also uncertainty about the outcome, but fortunately without any violence, despite extreme political tension and polarization. For modern Iraq, all these factors are of paramount importance.

Popular demands prompted the early elections following the massive demonstrations that began in October 2019, led by a new generation that challenged the ruling regime. Young Iraqis were up against those who ran Iraq and whom they saw as a corrupt and sectarian political establishment that had failed them in every way. Protesters rejected the 2018 election results, which they deemed rigged. They also defied armed groups and kept their protests peaceful despite facing violence that killed more than 600 people and 36 leaders.
It is also important to note that Iraqis were in charge of the elections. This time, the US, mindful of its previous failures and the sharply negative attitude of the local population, was forced to keep a “safe distance,” with a minimal military presence, careful not to say anything that could negatively affect the election process. All foreign interference was firmly rejected. Statements by the EU and UN officials regarding the elections have also been strongly criticized by the media and leaders of various political parties. At the same time, Iraqis wanted the legitimacy and protection that numerous international observers provided to the operation.

After a week of waiting, threats, arguments, and accusations between competing political parties in Iraq’s October 10 snap parliamentary elections, the country’s electoral commission put an end to speculation on social media by announcing the final results. The country’s Independent High Electoral Commission said voter turnout was 41.1% in all provinces, although polling officials and local and foreign observers said it may have been as low as 25%, as the country’s disillusioned youth and middle class largely stayed home. Initial results showed that the political class is accused of doing little to provide basic services or security to the country’s citizens by maintaining the status quo.

The final results were ambiguous, with a Sadrist victory under the banner of Iraqi nationalism through the Fatah coalition and Iranian influence and new persons entering Parliament as independent members. Now one can imagine that if there was no boycott, the new election law would have brought more civil society representatives and independent candidates to Parliament. No party has enough seats to govern on its own, and there is speculation about possible coalitions.

The Sadrist movement, led by populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, led the poll with 73 of the 329 seats in Parliament. The Progress Party, led by Parliament Speaker Mohammed Al-Khalbousi, came second with 37 seats, followed by former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki’s Rule of Law coalition with 35 seats. On the face of it, it was a decent result for al-Maliki, who won 10 seats in the last election in 2014. He may have hoped for a return to power with the support of the usually powerful Fatah alliance affiliated with Iran. However, there are two problems with this. First, al-Maliki’s coalition is still far from the 92 seats it won in the 2014 Parliamentary elections. And secondly, the Fatah alliance, primarily represented by Iranian-backed armed Hashd al-Shaabi factions, performed abysmally in the last pre-election polls and was rejected entirely by Iraqi voters, reducing their number of seats in Parliament from 48 to 14.

Predictably, political forces affiliated with Tehran rejected the election results, which they called questionable. “We declare our total rejection of these results… which will negatively affect the democratic path and social harmony in the country,” their statement said. These are the true colors of Iranian-backed political parties with armed groups on the ground, for whom “democracy” is nothing more than an election slogan deployed on the assumption that the result will be in their favor. Their clear message to al-Sadr is that if democracy does not serve their purposes, their Iranian-funded weapons will do the job, and no government will be formed without their participation. Behind closed doors, they will continue to put maximum pressure on al-Sadr to prevent him from forming a government of his choice. Instead, they create an alliance similar to the one led by Adil Abdul-Mahdi from 2018 to 2020.

Most Iraqis have rejected Iranian influence in their country with either their votes or their refusal to vote, which, as many Arab analysts say, makes Tehran the biggest loser in Iraq’s 2021 elections. Still, at the same time, it does not increase US leverage. Al-Sadr opposes any foreign intervention in Iraq, whether from Tehran or Washington. He wants the US to begin a serious dialogue about its military presence on Iraqi land. “We are Iraqis, we are neither oriental nor Western. We want [to] live in peace, and for anyone who opposes that, we have an appropriate response,” he said after the election.

With al-Sadr as a mediator in power, a man known for his fickle whims, choices, and allies, the election result delays building an institutional state in Iraq that respects international agreements and human rights. The country’s future, notes Egypt’s Al-Ahram, is no brighter than before October 10. Iraq is on the verge of facing an Iranian backlash from violent militias, while the international community remains unable to help defenseless Iraqis who have lost faith in democracy. And history will repeat itself.

There is also a historical and international context. Iraq’s recent traumatic history has left its mark and affects society’s ability to recover. The Iranian-Iraqi war of the 1980s, the invasion of Kuwait and the second Gulf War, the massacres of Kurds in Halabja and Anfal, the suppression of the southern Shiite uprisings in the south in 1991, the ethnic cleansing among Arabs - all these are part of the legacy of Saddam Hussein’s rule long before the additional acute trauma caused by the shameless US invasion. Iraq’s transition could have started in 1991 if the President George H. W. Bush Administration, which talked a lot about spreading democracy, had behaved like a major power responsible for democracy and had brought at least some of the sprouts of democracy to the Arab country. The
United States chickened out, behaved illogically and incompetently about regime change. That is why Saddam Hussein remained in power, thanks to the USA. The population was subject to further harsh sanctions that did nothing for the US or Iraq, resulting only in the country being divided into three zones. Thus, 30 years were blotted out from the history of Iraq, a global Arab country, but they remained in the bitter memory of the Iraqi people who now can only rely on themselves as they did far back in 1991.

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