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Analytical article

Breakthrough or Turnaround? Post-election Iraq

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A year after the Iraqi parliamentary elections, the three Iraqi presidencies (presidents of the republic, the government, and Parliament) are now elected, with the Parliament naming Abdul Latif Rashid as President of the Republic of Iraq. He tasked the Coordinating Framework's candidate Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani with forming the government.

A week earlier, Parliament passed a vote of confidence to maintain Muhammad

al-Halbousi as Speaker of the House of Representatives, rejecting his resignation. The formation of Iraqi presidencies puts an end to the political transition that lasted for about two and a half years, following the 2019 October Protest Movement, which toppled the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi, demanding comprehensive change.

While the Iraqi political forces agreed, during the national dialogue meetings held in August and September 2022, to hold early elections (which

would have meant entering into a new transitional stage), the election of presidents of the government and the parliament within the context of a parallel political dialogue gave rise to the “State Management” (SM) coalition, which undermined the possibility of another transitional period, particularly with the election process carried out under the dome of parliament within an integrated procedural context and in light of the decision the Supreme court of approval of the CF as the largest bloc in the parliament succeeding the winning Sadrist bloc which resigned from the parliament. As such, the parliamentary majority aren’t likely to accept the move to a new transitional phase.

As is reflected by the political scene, Al-Sudani’s election crisis was seemingly overcome through a political “turnaround” that was passed through the National Dialogue channel. The election of Rashid was made through a similar path, yet with no political consensus between the two Kurdish parties, in a dramatic scene that started with a dispute between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan followed by the settlement twilight that didn’t bring about a consensual Kurdish candidate, announcing

recourse to the parliament.

Behind the scenes of electing Rashid, indicators suggested a state of Kurdish polarization and considerable political deals arranged behind the scenes to display the scene as this.

In view of this, the political scene seems to have moved to another stage that will draw features of the next phase, i.e. the step of designating Al-Sudani to form the government, which is considered a new challenge in spite of the ongoing developments. Despite the confirmation of the Prime Minister designate of his ability to form the government within two weeks, he will have consider several entitlements, including primarily:

1. **Carrying out a political engineering process** to select members of his cabinet and cater to all the partners of the CF within the framework of the SM coalition.
2. **Meeting Partners’ Entitlements:** The Sunni bloc has entitlements that have been deferred for a while, including repatriation of the internally displaced persons due to the anti-IS operations and the security and political balances of the political

bloc. The Kurdish bloc also has entitlements related to the Sinjar Agreement on security arrangements between the federal and regional governments, let alone controversy over Article 41 of the Constitution on the internal border dispute and oil arrangements.

3. **Containing the Sadrist Movement:** This is a tough challenge, particularly with confirmations of the Sadrists’ non-participation in the government amid preservations of the Sadrists on the political process in general and its outcome. That said, there are endeavors [by the Sadrists] to return to the Al-Hannanah negotiations, although it may not prove productive in case another path is taken.
4. **Containing the Masses:** This is a complex point. On the one hand, there were security tensions concurrent with the Parliamentary elections, where nine missiles were fired towards the Green Zone, without any party claiming responsibility for these attacks and with the Sadrist movement condemning them. On the

other hand, local reports suggest that protests are likely to break out on 25 October and there are fears that these protests will mark a new turning point in the scene if violence erupts. If any indicator, this confirms that the street is still a key player in the political scene, as is the case with the Sadrist Movement, which despite being outside the political process is still an influential party in the political equation.

Obviously, a distinction should be made between immediate entitlements related to the procedures of the formation of the cabinet which according to the Constitution shall be completed within a month, and deferrable entitlements of the post-formation phase. In view of this, it can be argued that features of the new political phase have relatively taken shape, which can be detailed in the context of the following dimensions:

Stabilising the Rules of the Political System: By the political system, we mean the system formed after the US invasion of Iraq in 2004 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, of which the quota system is a notable political manifestation.

Concurrently with the outbreak of the October Protests, there were calls to change that system. The Sadrist Movement, which considered itself a partner in these protests, adopted these calls. Yet, other currents saw it difficult to change the structure of the political system and abandon the quota. Some of those forces, including the National Wisdom Movement, considered the current political system an achievement that cannot be abandoned.

More importantly, the expertise and structures of the Iraqi public sphere that have been formed over the course of nearly two decades are difficult to change. Indeed, it isn't only about the Shiite Movement but the Sunni and Kurdish calculations as well. The structures reflect a degree of balance, but erosion in this system may be attributed to the political practices and political polarization within these currents. Additionally, the political practices did not absorb the Iraqi social transformations and the position of social forces on management practices, e.g. issues of economic corruption and foreign interventions. As such, resolving this crisis may require the creation of a new social contract, which can't be established amid the current tensions. Perhaps there are precursors that indicate the possibility of reconsidering this situation in the future, particularly in view what Muhammad al-Halbousi proposed in the Baghdad Document.

Moving to a New Path of National Dialogue: In his first speech after being tasked to form the government, Al-Sudani took the initiative to stress the importance of the national dialogue and called on all the political blocs and civil currents to engage in it. It is expected that there will be a new path of dialogue that keeps pace with new developments and contains the political tensions, particularly tensions with the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr.

According to local observers, there are chances for a dialogue of this kind, notwithstanding al-Sadr's opposition to the steps taken by the CF since he doesn't object to al-Sudani personally. Overall, the involvement of Al-Sadr's Sunni and Kurdish allies in this outcome may prompt Al-Sadr to respond to the political dialogue.

As such, the future options, with the constraints and opportunities they offer, will be put to test the stage of forming the government, demonstrating whether Al-Sadr will accept participation in it or not (non-participation will be the likely option). Later, the dialogue will rely on the agenda of the political parties. Noteworthy, the outcomes of the dialogue held under the auspices of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi concluded with the end of the government's mission, an outcome that

al-Sadr didn't engage in. Here a distinction must be made between the national dialogue, which aims to address a political crisis that led to an armed escalation, and political reconciliation that addresses the political rift.

Agenda for the Next Phase:

The National Dialogue may be a central issue on the political agenda in the coming phase. It is important, however, to note that the political stalemate that prevailed over a year after the elections had had challenging repercussions for the domestic needs, particularly economic ones, that required the existence of a politically stable government. No sooner had Iraq emerged from the war against the IS under Haider al-Abadi's government than the political scene exploded during Adel Abdul-Mahdi's government. As for al-Kadhimi's government, it came under pressing political and security conundrums in two critical periods, i.e. the period of preoccupation with the political process towards the elections and the political settlement period that lasted for a year after the elections, let alone pressures of the agendas of domestic security and foreign policy.

Al-Sudani will likely face similar challenges, particularly with the continuation of the

political crisis, but he will not have the luxury of being confined to issues of the political crisis. Perhaps the first speech of Al-Sudani revealed his awareness of the need to take care of domestic files as a priority for his government. Al-Sudani underscored that he will focus on addressing poverty and inflation, providing job opportunities, improving the health situation, supporting youth and the representation of women, and working on confronting the security chaos.

Foreign Policy: The address of Al-Sudani didn't openly touch on foreign policy issues but this doesn't mean foreign policy falls outside his priorities, particularly given the connection between foreign issues and burning domestic ones, including the Iranian escalation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the repercussions of this on the relationship between the federal and regional governments. Under al-Kadhimi's government, there have been attempts to create regional balances between Arab and non-Arab regional powers, as has been evidenced by Iraq's sponsorship of talks between Iran and the KSA and hosting regional conferences that enshrine a formula of balance and common interests

with Iraq without intruding on its sovereignty.

Seemingly, Iraq will once again stand as an arena for the excess regional and international tensions, as has been the case before, given the internal tensions. On the other hand, the domestic agenda bloated with political, security, and economic challenges will push the political leadership to give priority to the internal affairs. Therefore, it is unlikely that there will be a variable in the rules of foreign policy as well, bearing in mind that the outcome of the current political situation tends to play in the hands of Iran with the CF, which is close to Iran, being the spearhead in managing the current political scene.

The Iraqi political scene has apparently crossed the barrier of the first phase of the political crisis experienced during the transitional period, through a "turnaround", manifested in the deals that reflected a pragmatic approach adopted by the political forces involved in the new political process. That said, there are still other barriers that stand in the way of resolving the political crisis towards a new phase.

In many respects, the formation of the government will remain a

major test to the understandings among forces, which would determine the strength or vulnerability of the current political process.

On the other hand, the Kurdish forces haven't overcome their crisis and the president was inaugurated through a political turnaround based on new alliances. In other words, the crisis was not resolved based on an internal consensus. As such, there will remain a crisis within the Kurdish house similar to that within the Shiite house. Such crises will likely keep Iraq within the circle of crises in the future, meaning the current scene does not represent a real breakthrough, as much as being a turnaround to calm down the situation temporarily.

Abdul Latif Rashid

Iraqi President



- Born in Sulaymaniyah in August 1944
- Leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party
- A chief political opponent of the former Iraqi regime
- Minister of Water Resources (2003-2010)
- Adviser to the President of the Republic since 2010
- Bachelor of Civil Engineering, the University of Liverpool, 1968
- Master of Engineering, the University of Manchester, 1972
- Ph.D. in Engineering, the University of Manchester, 1976

Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani

Prime Minister



- Born in Baghdad (Maysan), 1970
- Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, University of Baghdad
- Master of Project Management
- Governor of Maysan, 2009-2010
- Human Rights Minister, 2010-2014
- Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, 2014-2017
- Acting Minister for Ministries of Industry, Commerce, Finance, Migration and displacement, and Agriculture
- Member of the Council of Representatives for three consecutive terms (i.e. 2014, 2018, and 2021)