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Uprising or Election: What Kind of Change Do Iraqis Want?

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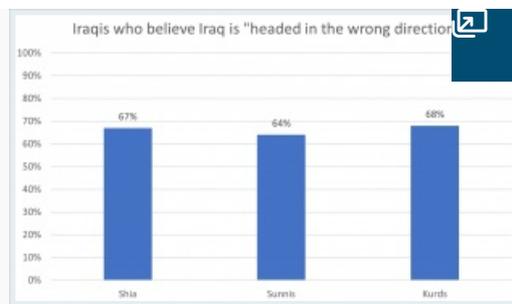
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**Brief Analysis**

New polls show that Iraqis want institutional change, but they are losing faith in elections as a real means towards reform.

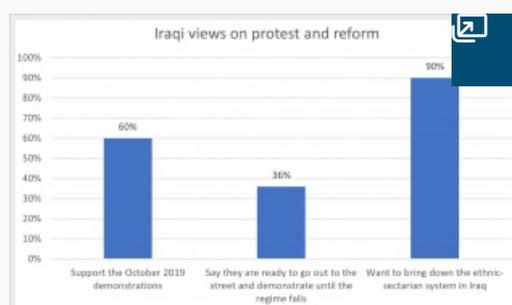
There is no longer any doubt among those following the Iraqi situation that a large majority of Iraqis want to change the system of government that was established in Iraq after 2003. According to the latest public opinion poll, conducted in 2021, more than 90% of Iraqis want to bring down the ethnic-sectarian system in Iraq. Among the most important reasons for that is the belief of an absolute majority (85%) that this system serves one sect or ethnic group, and is not designed to serve the majority of Iraqis. The paradox is that every ethnic group or sect believes that this regime does not serve it. Even the Shia and the Kurds, most of whom welcomed the overthrow of the previous regime and who often showed high levels of support for the current regime, have become unsatisfied with the current system's performance, according to opinion polls for the past five years. While 64% of Sunnis said just two weeks ago that they believe Iraq is headed in the wrong direction, the percentage was higher among the Shia (67%) and Kurds (68%).



The failure of the political system in Iraq has turned it from what was supposed to be a democratic system when established in 2003 into what political literature calls a kleptocracy – the rule of thieves. Corruption has spread in Iraq, reaching record levels and causing 95% of Iraqis to say that corruption is very widespread. According to Freedom House, Iraq has remained categorized as “Not Free” on the freedoms scale over the past five years. The same organization also designated it a Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime on the democracy scale.

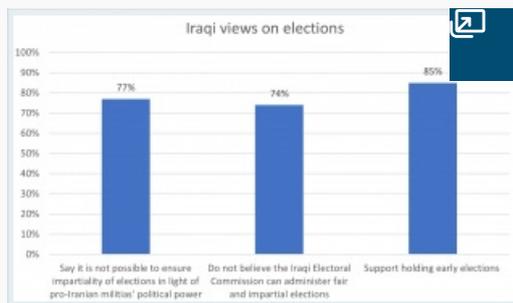
This failure has had a negative impact on Iraqis’ trust in all Iraqi state institutions (executive, legislative, and judicial). Not only that, but the lack of confidence has extended to the social level as well, which has seen a continuous erosion in social capital, causing less than 10% of Iraqis to trust each other. Even the religious establishment, which once had the confidence of most Iraqis, has declined, with only 38% trusting it in 2021.

These figures and others are what caused Iraqis, and particularly youth, to take to the public squares and streets in the tens of thousands in October 2019, calling for regime change. They are what caused more than 60% of all Iraqis, including 70% in Shia areas, to support that uprising. And despite some concessions from the current political class in Iraq, such as changing the government, passing a new electoral law, and replacing the Independent High Electoral Commission that many Iraqis saw as biased, things do not appear much better now according to the latest public opinion polls. There are 70% of Iraqis who believe that Iraq’s youth do not have a good future, and more than a third of Iraq’s youth would like to emigrate outside the country.



Despite these disappointing figures, the worst is yet to come. For young people aspiring to change the current situation, although they believe in democracy and the ballot box as a means for change, it is clear that they have lost trust in the mechanisms of peaceful and controlled change. They are more inclined to return to the street and the experience of change through protests and uprising that achieved some of what they were aiming for, but did not bring the change they aspire to. Some 85% of Iraqis supported holding early elections to get out of the current situation. But 70% do not believe that elections will change how the government is run. It is clear that Iraqis do not believe that elections are able to bring about a better system of government. The reason for this does not seem to lie solely in the power, influence, and organization of the current parties in comparison with the many new parties that emerged from the October uprising and which lack organization, resources, and a unified direction. Rather, more important than that is the loss of Iraqis’ confidence in the ability of the current political establishment to organize

and manage fair elections. Some 74% of Iraqis do not believe the Iraqi Electoral Commission can administer fair and impartial elections. Above that, 77% of Iraqis, including 76% in Shia areas, believe it is not possible to ensure the impartiality of elections in light of pro-Iranian militias' control over the political scene.



The relative calm of the Iraqi street that supported the uprising due to the spread of Coronavirus and the change of government has apparently caused the traditional Iraqi political forces that currently control the political process to misjudge the situation and believe that, by organizing elections in which they will be most able to win, they will be able to perpetuate their hegemony over Iraq for years to come. But this assessment is wrong, and fails to read the public reality and what frustrated youth are feeling in Iraq in general and in the southern regions in particular. If the upcoming elections fail to bring about the change that Iraqis are calling for, they will open the door to all kinds of uncontrolled change, including violent change. More than 36% of Iraqis overall, including 58% of Shia who are mostly under age 35, said they are ready to go out to the street and demonstrate until the regime falls. Hence, it appears the likelihood of a renewed uprising is stronger than the prospects for change through the ballot box. Despite the organization and peaceful nature of those who rose up in Iraq until now, the possibility of sliding towards the unknown remains and strongly persists. For that reason, the Iraqi government, those holding on to power, and even the international community must ensure transparent and impartial elections if they want to avoid this slippery slope. The most important question in Iraq today is no longer if change in the political system will happen or not, but rather: What kind of change will it be? Will it be safe and nonviolent, based on the ballot box, or unsafe and dangerous through uprising or a popular revolution of which we may not know the extent, but do know the risks. ❖



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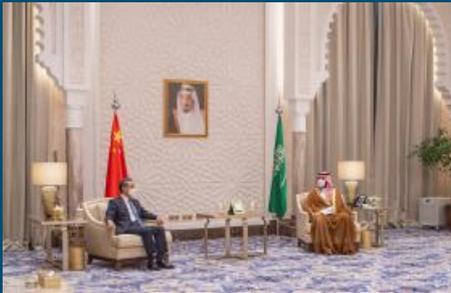
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