

Iraq's Purple Coup: A Truly Iraqi Electoral Surprise, Par Excellence

by [Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](#)

Dr. Munqith Dagher is MENA director and a board member of Gallup International. Dr. Dagher is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

Preliminary election results illustrate Iraqi opposition to foreign influence and the impact of the Marja'iyya of Najaf, as the Sadrists lead the coalition-building process to form the next parliament.

U pending all sorts of expectations, the elections in Iraq last Sunday were truly Iraqi elections: the Iraqi electorate punished candidates whose loyalties clearly might not lie solely with Iraq. Just as I and other Iraqis know that it is Iraqis—and young Iraqis in particular—who must demand change, I also know that change will not take place unless it is the majority of Iraqis who insist upon it. This makes the election results announced last Monday in Baghdad and the southern region of the country, the main hotspot for change, of particular interest.

The overall results, as well as the results in these focal spots, reflected a true change in the Iraqi political landscape that flew in the face of most pre-election predictions. Although I had previously warned about the trap of electoral forecasting due to the radical change in the election law—splitting Iraq into 83 electoral districts instead of prior elections' method of using Iraq's 18 governorates as districts—I still did not expect the sort of quantitative and qualitative changes that ultimately occurred this time around. Though many suspected that the Sadrist Movement would take first place due to its solid grassroots organization, even the most optimistic neutral observers could not have expected it to win around 73 out of 329 seats in the next Parliament according to the preliminary results.

On the other hand, no one expected that the Iran-allied forces—the Fatah Alliance and Huqooq Party—would not be able to obtain more than 16 seats. This is a third of what they won in the previous election, thereby greatly weakening their influence within Parliament. Although the Maliki Bloc, also an ally to the Iranian axis, unexpectedly won 37 seats, poor performance by this bloc's allies, including several Sunni and Kurdish parties, will make it nearly impossible for them to form a government even were they to attempt it.

The reformist Tishreen Movement and independents also pulled a major upset, scoring gains despite the fact that a broad swathe of their voter base advocated boycotting the elections after deeming it futile to run candidates or even vote. Though the counts are still not final, the Tishreen Movement and independents seem to have won more than 40 seats. Were they to agree to enter parliament as a single bloc, which is admittedly unlikely, this would put them in either second or third place in Parliament—a notable achievement for a new movement.

Theoretically, these results allow those Shia forces opposed to Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs to easily join their Sunni and Kurdish counterparts, who make up more than half of the seats of the coming Parliament. This will also prime them to potentially assume control of all three seats of power: President of the Republic, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament.

This scenario is the exact opposite of what occurred after the 2018 elections, when supporters of parliamentary influence took control over those top three positions. On the other hand, the huge success of the Tishreen Movement and secular independents, especially in the traditional southern Iraqi Islamist strongholds of Najaf, Babylon, Karbala, Nasiriyah, and Diwaniya has sparked a blaze of hope. It was the very spark that Iraqis—especially those rising up against the current political class—needed in order to restore some of the trust they had lost in the political regime.

The Iraqi perspective of state institutions is quite pessimistic; according to IACSS polling, the current popular approval rate of Parliament hovers around just 15 percent, while levels of trust for most executive and judicial institutions are similarly low. Certainly, the recent election results will quell the argument made by two-thirds of youths from southern Iraq, who said in the same poll that the only means for change was found in the streets, not the ballot box. At the very least, the election results may make them reconsider their convictions, as well as their participation in future elections. This would allow them to bolster their influence in the political process.

I should note that two key factors contributed to these results. The first, which I had predicted and noted in an [article \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/holy-shrine-units-announcement-will-change-rules-game-iraq\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/holy-shrine-units-announcement-will-change-rules-game-iraq) here less than a week ago, is the role of the Marja'iyya of Najaf. The Marja'iyya's September 29 statement encouraging Iraqis to participate in the election, along with the [turnout events \(http://www.apple.com\)](http://www.apple.com) held by their supporters that followed and lasted up until election night, clearly helped to boost the participation rate by at least 5-10%. According to a poll we conducted in the first half of September 2021, the anticipated participation rate was expected to be between 25-30%. This increase almost definitely occurred in independents and Shia religious forces unaligned with Iran, especially since the Marja'iyya's call coincided with the announcement of the breakaway of the Holy Shrine Units (Atabat) from the larger Popular Mobilization Forces, which have a large contingent of Iranian backed militia groups. The latter announcement was a clear message against the influence of Iran and its allies, which has greatly reduced their fortunes in the southern region of Iraq.

The second important factor was the Iraqi government's ability to manage the electoral process. So far, no systematic electoral irregularities have been recorded, in contrast to the 2018 elections. Despite the media whirlwind triggered by the losers in the elections, which is aided by the bad media performance of the Electoral commission IHEC, there was no solid evidence of any systemic electoral fraud. The pressures that the electoral losers are now placing on the Kadhimī government over purported fraud poses a difficult test to the government's performance on top of the election test. And if Kadhimī is able to withstand the threats of the losers and their media machine, this will be recorded as one of the government's biggest successes. Even if the Kadhimī government—which must now pack its bags—can boast of no other accomplishments, they can take pride in having held clean elections, especially in light of the extremely complex domestic and foreign political circumstances. The Kadhimī government can now claim that they have achieved a good part of what the October (Tishreen) protests demanded.

What is expected to come now is the formation of a governing coalition. This process will be led by the Sadrists in

cooperation with the current Speaker of Parliament Al-Halbousi, head of the successful Kurdistan Democratic Party Barzani, several of the winning Tishreen and independent members, and other smaller groups. This coalition will easily cross the required threshold of 50 percent plus one, and would nearly approach a two-thirds majority, a situation previously unseen in the Iraqi Parliament. Such a comfortable majority will make it much easier for Sadr to follow through on most of the promises made in his victory speech last night, during which he clearly promised to put a stop to weapons outside of state control along with foreign influence and interference in Iraq. It is true that Maliki is trying now to establish a larger alliance with more seats in the parliament in a similar political maneuver to what he managed in the 2010 election. That year, the Allawi alliance won the election but Maliki—with the help of the constitutional court, Iran, and the Obama administration—succeeded in forming a political coalition. However, neither the internal political environment nor the foreign influence have the appetite or the capability to follow the same course as in 2010.

Although the past examples of forming political alliances in Iraq make me very hesitant to be optimistic—especially when it comes to keeping promises—what worries me more is the prospect of military escalation by the armed forces that lost in the elections. These forces have already started threatening to overturn the election results. However, the Iraqi state’s current military capabilities are supported by the Atabat and the Sadrist militias, and these combined forces may be enough to prevent the losing factions from aggravating tensions. Even with what seems to be a reduced willingness of Iran to support its followers in Iraq and escalate the security threats there, the government and international community alike should remain vigilant to these possibilities to prevent the alternative of being caught off-guard. ❖

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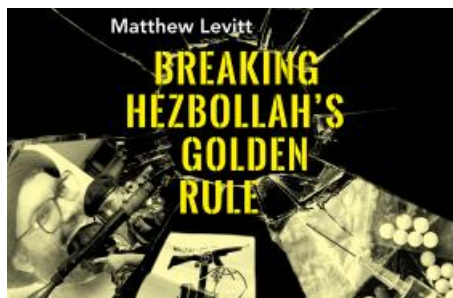
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