

Will the Sadrists Succeed in Effecting Regime Change in Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

New polling reveals how the Iraqi public views Baghdad's ongoing political crisis.

August 24 was a pivotal day in the conflict between Sayyid al-Sadr and his Coordination Framework rivals for the future of the Iraqi government. Sadrists took an unexpected step in surrounding the Supreme Judicial Council building, which led to the suspension of the judiciary's work. The move likewise led to unintended consequences, with observers concerned that there could be a full coup in Iraq, particularly after the Sadrists had obstructed the Iraqi Council of Representatives previously.

However, the Sadrists seemed to quickly realize that their supporters needed to withdraw from in front of the Supreme Judicial Council building after a variety of domestic and foreign forces indicated they were not amenable to this step. This new move raises the question of whether the Sadrists' retreat signals a strategic loss in their ten-month-old conflict with the Coordination Framework forces.

In examining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for both sides, we can see that each side has different strengths. The Sadrists have a very loyal and well-organized grassroots base that significantly expands their capabilities. Their critiques of the quota system, corruption, and dependence on Iran have always been well-received by the Iraqi public. Their rhetoric also closely mirrors the discourse produced by the Shia religious authority (*marja'*) in Najaf. Sadr's main stumbling block has been his involvement with the previous and current governments and his falling out with the October 2019 youth a few months after the uprising. There is a silent portion of the Iraqi street that subsequently began to question the Sadrists' intent.

For its part, the Shia Coordination Framework has been backed by a network of financial and arms coalitions, some

of which Finance Minister Ali Allawi alluded to in his recent resignation speech. This alliance successfully applied a carrot and stick approach to control the deep state and gained additional power after the Sadrists withdrew from the Council of Representatives. The withdrawal allowed those seats to be replaced by sympathetic representatives who strengthened the Coordination Framework's parliamentary legitimacy. As is also true for the Sadrists, the Framework's main weakness is the Iraqi public, which seems skeptical and even angry about the Framework's performance, especially their corruption during the last twenty years and their complete dependence on Iran. If the Iraqi public is reluctant to support the Sadrists, they are decidedly against the Coordination Framework forces.

With regard to opportunities and threats, the most recent opinion poll conducted by Al-Mustakella for Research Group (IIACSS) indicates that there is a real opportunity for the Sadrists to achieve their stated objective through peaceful regime change and popular revolution. We should first mention that this poll was conducted after the Sadrists entered the Green Zone but before they staged a sit-in in front of the Supreme Judicial Council building. The poll found that 55 percent of Iraqis supported the Sadrists entering the Green Zone, which jumped to 61 percent in southern Iraq, where both the Sadrists' and Coordination Framework's popular bases are located. The good news for the Sadrists was that more than 50 percent of respondents in the south believed that the Sadrists' revolt aimed to reform the regime, while only 19 percent felt that the Sadrists wanted to seize power.

The same percentage believed that the real reason behind the Sadrists' actions was their conflict with the Coordination Framework or Maliki. In other words, prior to surrounding the Supreme Judicial Council building, the Sadrists had been gaining legitimacy with the Iraqi public. This would have been a major political lever for the Sadrists, especially given that the same poll found that there was very little trust in the political process as a whole. Only 12 percent of respondents said they had confidence in the Council of Representatives, which fell to 8 percent in the south—the lowest level of confidence in any Iraqi parliament since 2005. Only 25 percent of Iraqis have confidence in the government and only 17 percent believe that Iraq is headed in the right direction.

It is clear that the Sadrists were on their way towards winning the battle over popular support—at least until the Coordination Framework forces exploited the fallout from the Sadrists' attempt to suspend the judiciary. This raised fears at both the local and global levels regarding what might happen if the Sadrists prevailed. The Framework forces quickly made the most of the suspension of the judiciary—though this body also suffers from declining public trust at 38 percent—to rekindle fears that the Sadrists could monopolize power and promote extremism if they won.

Nevertheless, the Framework forces overplayed their hand, making the same mistake that they had when the Sadrists withdrew from the Council of Representatives and the Framework rushed to declare victory, claiming that the Sadrists had lost. This reflected a misreading of Sadr and his followers, who became more insistent about achieving their goal of changing the political regime while enjoying widespread popular support. The Framework forces miscalculated the extent of the threat that they were facing and overestimated their limited capacities to counter it. As polling demonstrates, there is a great deal of popular rage against the political regime. Sadr has announced that his objective was regime change, aligning with the will of the people, while the Framework made clear they were trying to preserve the regime.

The Coordination Framework forces did not seem to realize that this was a long battle that would be won by whichever side had greater endurance and sustained momentum. Sadr has a strong base that would be difficult to dismantle even in a longer conflict. In contrast, the Framework is a coalition force composed of elements with divergent objectives, ties, and approaches, which could make it easier to break up the group over time. Furthermore, the Framework has not been able to achieve anything tangible to help the masses and assuage their anger and frustration with the regime. The Framework has become good at the game of obstruction, but is neither willing nor able to enact the changes that the people want.

The Sadrists' odds of victory will be more favorable if they exploit the Framework's main weakness, namely their

distance from and hostility towards the Iraqi public, which is angry with the Framework while skeptical of the Sadrists. If the Sadrists are able to allay the public's fears regarding their intentions and rebuild their alliance with the October 2019 youth forces, there is no doubt they will achieve their goals. It is evident that the Iraqi political regime is on the verge of collapse, but the bigger question remains as to whether Sadr and his followers will be able to topple the regime with their broad popular coalition in the short term, or whether this be pushed further into the future—and perhaps into the hands of another popular force—if the Sadrists fail to take advantage of their present opportunity. ❖

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