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2018 Iraqi Elections: Three Observations Doubts the Effectiveness of the Next Government

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Brief Analysis

In May 2018, Iraqis will again dip their forefingers in that purple ink and choose their representatives for Parliament. Unlike previous elections, this election has a unique taste of importance as it comes right after the declaration of victory against IS (Islamic State) in Iraq. The next parliament will form the government that will defend Iraq from terrorist resurgence. This makes the 2018 Iraqi elections another chapter of the “war on terror” in Iraq. However, the war on terror does not solely define the importance of these elections. The 2018 Iraqi budget indicates a deficit of nearly 13 trillion dinars, revealing Iraq’s economic downturn. This makes economic reforms another challenge that voters should keep in mind when marking the ballot papers. Current Prime Minister Abadi began tackling corruption right after declaring victory against IS. Although actual reforms against corruption may not occur, it does not underestimate the importance within the intent. As a result, tackling corruption remains another critical challenge for the next government to stabilize Iraq. Though it is too early to predict, three observations regarding the 2018 Iraqi elections might help forecast the nature of the next elected Iraqi government.

Political division is the biggest highlight of the 2018 Iraqi elections. This political division did not only affect Shiites and Sunnis sects, but it also highly affected Kurds. After the failed Independence referendum held in Kurdistan region, the Kurdish political parties under the previous “Kurdistan Alliance” have splintered off. The newly established coalition between the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, Corran Movement, and Islamic Group of Kurdistan present a strong candidacy. The PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), the main two wings of “Kurdistan Alliance”, declared earlier that they would join the elections in separate electoral lists. This leaves the Kurdish side of the elections more divided than ever.

Within the Sunni sect, division is not new but occurred right after the 2010 elections. In 2010, the main Sunni political powers with Shiite liberal figure Ayad Allawi were united under the “Iraqi List”. However, in 2014, they divided into “United to Reform” which included public politicians, “Salem Al-Jubori, Osama Al-Nujaifi, and Qasim Al-Fahdawi” and “Al-Arabiya Coalition” led by Salih Al-Mutlaq. In 2018, the Sunnis remain divided into two main

lists, but the alliances differ. Ayad Allawi, Salem al-Jubori, and Salih al-Mutlaq are united within the Iraqi List along with some leaders of the Sunni PMF (Sunni Popular Mobilization Forces). Osama Al-Nujaifi and his brother Atheel al-Nujaifi formed Decision Alliance along with other powers. Some minor political powers were formed away from the main Sunni key players, such as the Qasim al-Fahdawi alliance.

The Shiite powers are going through the worst separation phase since 2003. It started with the separation of Ammar al-Hakeem from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq to form the al-Hikma Movement. Additionally, this phase marks the end of the “catholic marriage” between Badr Organization and State of Law Alliance (led by Nouri Al-Maliki). Hadi al-Amiri, leader of Badr Organization, is leading Fatih Alliance which is composed of political wings of the groups that formed the PMF (Popular Mobilization Force), such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. It is also composed of traditional political powers like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. The political division also affects the State of Law Alliance in its core, the al-Dawaa Party. Al-Dawaa Party has not officially divided, but its members have separated into two electoral lists: State of Law Alliance and Nasr Alliance. Nasr Alliance is led by PM Haider al-Abadi, who is trying to establish an anti-sectarian alliance. He composed the alliance out of Dawaa party members and Sunni and Kurdish figures.

The increased presence of minor powers is the next highlight of the 2018 Iraqi elections. Some minor powers have separated themselves from the major alliances and chosen to compete single-handedly. For instance, Iradda Movement, led by Hanan al-Fatlawi, will compete in the elections independently, while it held a previous allegiance with State of Law Alliance. The presence of minor powers, along with the split of the main alliances, will scatter the votes among a large variety of major electoral lists as well as highlight the role of minor powers. The current division suggests that the elections are not going to generate a landslide victory. As a result, the next Iraqi parliament may be increasingly diverse. Thus, minor powers could play a greater role in these elections. Major lists could favor a coalition with a minor power rather than a major one to form the government to increase their chances to arrive at a win-win situation in negotiations. This might also explain the “technical reasons” behind the peaceful separation of al-Hikma Movement from Nasr Alliance.

In addition, some politicians in the 2018 parliamentary elections emerged in new outfits. For different reasons and circumstances, some old political figures have changed their political approach to appear as new actors in the Iraqi political arena. First, Sadri Movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, has formed the coalition of “Sa’aroon”, which also includes the Iraqi Communist Party. Although Sa’aroon looks like a new player in the arena, it is an old player, (Ahrar Bloc 2014), wearing a new outfit. Second, the Coalition for Justice and Democracy, found by former member of PUK Barham Salih, is considered to be a new actor on the Kurdish side of the equation. Sunnis politicians are also politically rebranding. For example, Salem Al-Jubori, whose political history is Islamic, is leading a new political party named the Civil Society for Reform for May’s elections after leaving his former Islamic party.

Political division, minor powers, and new outfits are three major highlights that remark the 2018 Iraqi elections. Concurrently, the new political outfits are going to bring up new major clashes among front-runners. Based on those observations, it is unlikely the next Iraqi government will successfully implement the suggested reforms. The political divisions could inhibit the formation of coalition government, preventing one or two coalitions to form a majority in the next parliament. Consequently, minor alliances could be empowered as potential power brokers. This raises questions regarding the next government to be elected in May 2018. Will it be able to construct a security plan to eliminate, even though incompletely, the threats of ISIS remnants? Is it going to come up with a well-built economic plan to achieve at least the necessary reforms demanded by the IMF? Will the next PM be able to maintain the war on corruption? ❖



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