

Iraqi Elections Deepen Political Fault Lines amid U.S.-Iran Tensions

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The U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, along with the parliamentary gains made by former militia members, could turn Iraq once again into a war theater.

Turnout in the Iraqi election on Saturday hit a record low at less than 45%, down from 60% in the 2014 and 2010 elections. The public was disillusioned with the buffet of parties, whose members are seen as corrupt politicians vying for positions in a political bazaar after every election.

Why it matters: The product of ethno-sectarian power sharing, past governments have been weak and ineffective. Iraqis wanted a new, corruption-free government that would offer services, jobs and security, and a victor with a clear agenda and a strong national mandate. Instead, this weekend's elections only deepened the country's political fractures.

As identity politics failed to keep parties unified, intra-community factionalism emerged, with Shia, Sunni and Kurdish houses all internally divided and competing for votes. The winner this time around, Muqtada al-Sadr, has about 55 of the 329 seats. In order to form a government, at least four of the major blocs will need to coalesce, but without a clear mandate or agenda, parties will resort to old practices of horse-trading for government positions and doling out patronage to their supporters.

Such a mismatch between demand for better, stronger government and the election results will keep Iraq in a vicious cycle. This time around, however, the system does not have the public support it hid behind in the past, foretelling public discontent and instability.

The big picture: These internal disputes are taking place as the two main foreign forces in Iraq, the U.S. and Iran, head toward greater hostility. The U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the possibility of escalation, as well as the parliamentary gains made by former militia members, could turn Iraq once again into a war theater. Having just eased the horrors of ISIS, Iraq cannot stomach another round of such turmoil.

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