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Promoting democracy is Iraq's greatest internal challenge

After a year of struggle, a government has been formed in Iraq. Still, the sought-after political and social peace is yet to be seen

This time, rocket fire from Baghdad's Green Zone could not stop the parliamentary session from being held. Just over a year after the parliamentary elections on 10 October 2021, the political deadlock in Iraq ended with the election of Kurdish politician Abdul Latif Rashid as president. He was sworn in on Monday, and the formation of a government under the Shiite Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani as prime minister is now merely a formality. The triumvirate of the Muhasasa system, the ethnic-religious quota system, is thus complete – Sunni Mohammed Al-Halbousi remains speaker of parliament, the Kurd Abdul Latif Rashid is Iraq's new president, and Shiite Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani leads the government as prime minister.

But one person is staying behind empty-handed: the Shiite cleric and troublemaker Muqtada al-Sadr gambled too high. His movement, as the winner of the parliamentary elections, had by far the best cards. By resigning his movement's parliamentary mandates, he catapulted himself out of inner-parliamentary events and left the playing field to the Shiite coordination framework, which is hostile to him. Although he has tried to exercise his power by storming the Green Zone and holding parliamentary sit-ins, it appears that he has no more trump cards up his sleeve.

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His current restraint is unusual for him and is probably an expression of the realisation that he was wrong in his strategy. However, anyone who knows al-Sadr knows that he does not like being pushed to the sidelines, and that without him neither political nor social peace can be achieved. It can be assumed that he will be pulling the strings behind the scenes to engineer the failure of the new government and is already

positioning himself for new elections.

A troubled political system

International players like the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) are breathing a sigh of relief – in their view, the way is now clear for Iraq, after over a year of being otherwise preoccupied, to turn its attention back to the country's real problems: the economic crisis, the climate crisis and corruption. The danger of further destabilisation and the accompanying movement of refugees seems to have been averted for the time being. But will the new government really be able to find answers to Iraq's major challenges and create social peace?

No matter how ambitious the new Iraqi government may be in its efforts, it is already clear that Iraq will imminently face the next escalation if the system does not change fundamentally. The inherent dysfunctionality of the Iraqi political system reproduces itself and continuously generates social inequalities that increase over time. Political clientelism repeatedly favours the same circles and thus creates dissatisfaction among those who are excluded and structurally disadvantaged. As their frustration increases, so does the risk of violent clashes that have regularly shaken Iraq for many years. But political, economic and military power (in the form of militias) are concentrated in the same hands, and uprisings are met with violent repression.

The playing field of the new Iraqi government is thus clearly marked: reforms are possible only insofar as the existing balance of power is maintained. This political culture, coupled with a dominant rentier economy, a bloated public sector, and pervasive corruption makes any kind of change seem illusory. This is a fatal signal to a crisis-ridden country that, despite growing oil revenues, cannot even provide for the basic needs of its rapidly growing population.

The need for a national dialogue

What could a peaceful path for transformative change look like? The prerequisite for this would be, first and foremost, an admission by the government and the political elite that the political system is dysfunctional. Moreover, it would also require the will to actually be in the service of the people and practice selflessness. Understanding itself as a transitional government allows the necessary steps to be taken towards a political system that will make Iraq a democracy not only on paper.

This includes conducting a broad national dialogue, which could restore

the population's severely shaken confidence in democracy. Since the first Iraqi parliamentary elections after the US invasion in 2005, voter turnout has steadily declined, falling to a record low of 43.5 per cent in 2021. Iraqis do not feel that elections are a mouthpiece for their vote or a lever for change.

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This is no surprise, since there has been no political stability nor actual reforms in recent years. Instead of translating the will of the electorate into government action, political parties have only fought to maintain their influence and to hold on to power. A national dialogue could help to close the deep rifts between different ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. Especially after the power struggle between the supporters of al-Sadr and the Coordination Framework, it is also important to calm the waves within the Iraqi Shia. The playing off and inciting of the various groups by self-interested elites has so far massively stood in the way of the formation of an Iraqi identity. In essence, this corresponds to the demands of the October 2019 movement (*Tishreen*) to abolish the sectarian-dominated system and promote a unified sovereign Iraqi state.

Ultimately, a sustainable political and social peace can only succeed if the weapons are dropped. As long as predominantly pro-Iranian, Shiite militias act as an extension of political parties and threaten democracy activists, among others, this stands diametrically opposed to a healthy democracy. Promoting such a democracy is the greatest internal Iraqi challenge in the near future, and one that the international community should support in order to initiate far-reaching and lasting change, and to free itself forever from the networks of clientelism.



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