



Iraq's Election 2018

Why Iraq's Elections Were an Indictment of the Elite. By Dr Renad Mansour*

Iraqis and outside observers alike are still making sense of the surprise results of last weekend's elections, the country's first since the violent rise and fall of the Islamic State. In the biggest shock, the populist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's political coalition—a nationalist, non-sectarian alliance between his political movement, secular activists and the Iraqi Communist Party, known as Sairoon—won the most seats in parliament. Trailing just a few seats behind were [the pre-election favorite](#), the Nasr Alliance of incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and the Fateh Alliance led by Hadi al-Ameri, whose list represents a majority of paramilitary groups associated with the mainly Shiite Popular Mobilization Units.

The challenge of forming a government now awaits, and with it indications about Iraq's future and the prospects for demanded reforms.

Understanding these results and their implications starts with voter turnout, which at 44.5 per cent was the lowest of any elections since the United States invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The 2005 elections saw 70 per cent voter turnout; the most recent vote, in 2014, had 60 per cent turnout.

Before Iraqis went to the polls, the general mood in most major cities was disillusionment. When [asked about their preferred candidate](#), many Iraqis did not believe that the election would bring



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about real change. They saw yet another vote with over 90 per cent of the same electoral lists and coalitions promising reform. To them, the corrupt promising to fight corruption seemed farcical.

The many Iraqis who boycotted the vote referred to a previous message from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in defending their decision: 'He who has tried should not try.' On 4 May, Sistani also [declared](#) that the decision to vote or not was the choice of every Iraqi citizen—in contrast to 2005, when he said it was the duty of every citizen to vote.

The widespread disillusionment was connected to the ongoing protest movement that emerged in the summer of 2015 to demand actual reforms and an end to rule by the political elite that has been entrenched in power since the fall of Saddam. Cities where protests have been more frequent, from Basra to Baghdad, saw lower turnout than the national average.

Sadr's Sairoon coalition drew its support from a loyal base and this protest movement, so it was not affected by the low turnout. In fact, Sadr's coalition won roughly [the same number of votes](#) as it had in the 2014 election, but gained some 20 seats this time. Sadr's opponents, particularly Abadi and his predecessor as prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, were more affected by the boycott. Their pre-election maneuverings, such as a short-lived agreement in January between Abadi and Ameri to run as a single electoral bloc, could not convince voters that they were serious about political change.

Beyond Sadr's loyal base of followers, his coalition's [strategy to mobilize voters](#)[\(opens in new window\)](#) helps explain its surprising victory. It positioned itself as the only electoral list that could bridge



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the gap between Iraqi citizens and Baghdad elites. To prove that he was serious about change, Sadr put forward the highest number of new and non-establishment candidates, who were selected on the basis of popularity in their own neighborhoods, rather than through elite connections, patronage or the familiar identity-based calculations that have dominated Iraqi politics since 2003. Abadi, by contrast, focused on a cross-sectarian list but employed more elite candidates, including former and current ministers, in an election when Iraqis were more interested in the gap between ruler and ruled.

Since coming back from a self-imposed, three-year exile in Iran in 2011, Sadr has been at the forefront of attempts to change Iraq's political system. He [has revamped his image](#), from an anti-American militia leader to an Iraqi nationalist reformer. His style is to reflect the mood of protesters in the streets—a mood that has moved from anti-American during the US occupation to anti-Iranian and generally anti-elite in more recent years. He wants to end the post-2003 ethno-sectarian, quota-based system of sharing power known as muhassasa, which favors elites by divvying up ministries and government institutions via agreements between political factions.

Sadr has acted on this rhetoric. In 2012, for instance, he worked with Masoud Barzani, then president of Iraq's Kurdish region, and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to push forward a no-confidence motion that came close to sacking Maliki, who was centralizing power as prime minister. Then, in 2016, Sadr joined the protest movement, leading demonstrators to infiltrate the Green Zone and the Iraqi parliament, where he and his supporters staged an illegal sit-in. Ultimately, Sadr's actions forced Abadi to change his cabinet and appoint a number of politically independent, technocratic ministers. Unlike his opponents on the ballot, then, Sadr had a track



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record of acting on his calls for change that resonated among his base.

That record includes fighting corruption, which has ballooned in Baghdad. While Sadrists are not immune to this problem, Sadr has in the past attempted to address the issue within his own ranks. For instance, in 2015, Sadr pressured Deputy Prime Minister Baha al-Araji, a member of his movement, to resign amid corruption allegations. Sadr's opponents in this month's election had not proven to many Iraqis that they had that kind of commitment. In his four years in office, Abadi has failed to pursue anti-corruption measures, while Maliki's State of Law Coalition politicized anti-corruption campaigns by targeting Sunni and Kurdish opponents in Abadi's Cabinet.

Although initial media hype has suggested that Sadr's victory was a landmark in Iraq's post-2003 politics, the prospects for genuine reform via elections remain remote. This month's vote did not produce an outright winner with a majority in parliament. Instead, the top-three coalitions by votes—Sairoon, Ameri's Fateh Alliance and Abadi's Nasr Alliance—have an almost equal distribution of seats, giving each considerable sway in negotiations to form the next government.

As a result, that process will require political concessions from each coalition, which will lead to the diffusion of power across various elites. Iraqis refer to this as the 'splitting of the cake', where each leader is handed posts to form the government, thus limiting the ability of one leader to enforce immediate changes to the system. In the past, leaders have changed sides and withdrawn campaign promises in order to win positions, which helps explain the public's loss of faith in the elections. The establishment parties that still hold



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power over state institutions, including many ministries, will not easily give up their claims, jeopardizing the chances for reform.

In the past, Sadr has attempted to shake up the political system. The big question today is whether his slight victory will satisfy the millions of Iraqis who demand systemic change.

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<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-iraq-s-elections-were-indictment-elite>