



A Shiite Division:

The repercussions of the possible postponement of the Iraqi parliamentary elections

Future Briefs

Issue 584, 01 Sep 2021

On August 19, the Iraqi President called for a national dialogue regarding the upcoming elections, expressing his concerns about the challenges holding the elections on time. Thus, Iraq once again faces uncertainty regarding the fate of the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for October 10, 2021. A number of the Iraqi political forces announced their desire to postpone the elections, in support of the position of the leader of the Sadrist movement, while other forces oppose this approach and stand by holding the elections on their scheduled date.

Executive Division

The official position is still divided between the Head of State and the Prime Minister. While the former desires to postpone the elections, the latter seeks to hold them on time, based on the following:

1- Barham Salih's support for the postponement of the elections: The Iraqi President, Barham Salih, exhibited a flexible position on the issue of postponing the Iraqi elections, by calling for what he refers to as the national dialogue. He demands for not underestimating the challenges ahead of the process of holding the elections on their scheduled date. Perhaps, through this call, he seems to pose pressure on Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi to show greater flexibility towards the possibility of postponing the elections.

It seems that Saleh's recent position on postponing the elections hinges on legitimate concerns that align with the concerns of some political forces, who fear that the Sadrist movement and other parties boycotting the elections may lead to the return of public protests, which will have negative repercussions on the Iraqi scene.

2- Al-Kadhimi's demand that elections be held on time: Mustafa Al-Kadhimi is one of the most adherent parties to holding the elections on time. However, the calls for boycott and withdrawal constituted a source of great concern for the Iraqi government, as the security consequences of these withdrawals may impact the electoral process in some areas, where clashes may occur, taking the elections to unknown paths.

Therefore, Al-Kadhimi dealt realistically with the calls

A Shiite Division: The repercussions of the possible postponement of the Iraqi parliamentary elections. Future Briefs, Issue 584, 01 Sep 2021, Abu Dhabi, Future for Advanced Research & Studies.



for postponement. He formed a special committee which included a number of political forces, to discuss with the boycotting forces the possibility of reversing their decision. The committee began its meetings with those forces, but its endeavors have not yet succeeded in persuading Al-Sadr to change his position.

Divergence of Political Forces

The position of key political forces on the issue of postponing the elections can be exemplified as follows:

1- The Sadrist movement's demand to postpone the elections: The Sadrist movement is one of the top forces calling for the postponement of the elections. Muqtada al-Sadr had previously announced his withdrawal from the elections, but then a few days ago, he set two conditions for his acceptance of changing his position: postponing the elections and issuing a statement by Al-Sistani condemning the interventions of the armed factions in the political process. Al-Sadr bases his position and the conditions he set on the fact that armed groups are holding onto the election date in order to control the next government, amid the absence of political and popular forces from the electoral process.

2- The division amid other Shiite parties: The Iraqi Shiite parties intensified their meetings over the past days, to respond to Muqtada al-Sadr's conditions, in order to have him refrain from boycotting the elections. Most Shiite parties adhere to holding the elections on time, particularly the State of Law coalition, led by Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq movement headed by Qais Khazali, and Hadi al-Amiri, Leader of Al-Fatah Alliance. Sources quoted one of the attendees of these meetings as saying that: «Al-Sadr may and is free to play the role of the political opposition in the country».

On the other hand, the rest of the Shiite partners, including the Victory Alliance, led by Former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, are concerned about the political repercussions of al-Sadr's absence from the elections. These blocs continue to pose pressure on al-Sadr to dissuade him from withdrawing from the elections.

3- The absence of Sunni consensus: There is no consensus among the forces representing the Sunnis on the issue of the elections. Earlier last month, a number of these parties withdrew from the electoral scene, most notably the National Dialogue Front, led by Saleh al-Mutlaq. It remains unclear whether these parties will reverse their decision if the elections are held as scheduled, or if they are postponed.

Diversely, the National Progress Coalition led by Mohammed al-Halbousi, opposed the postponement of the elections, warning that attempts to postpone them would expose the country to chaos, given that holding early elections came as a result of public pressure and demonstrations which erupted two years ago.

4- Boycott of secular and national forces: The Al-Wafaq Party, the Iraqi Communist Party, and several parties emanating from the Iraqi uprising announced their boycott of the early elections. These parties were headed by the National Coalition Party. They are not very influential in the electoral scene, as most of them engage in large blocs, whether Sunni or Shiite, in order to ensure their parliamentary representation. Thus, their position on postponing the elections is only complementary, reflecting the extent of national consensus on the issue.

5- Najaf's understanding of the postponement of the elections: The religious leader, Ali al-Sistani, had warned in August 2020 against delaying the elections. However, he also stated that holding them "without securing their appropriate conditions will lead the country to a situation that threatens its unity and the future of its children". On the other hand, three religious' leaders in Najaf who are close to Al-Sistani also confirmed that «there is no specific position on the current political debate, and that the date of the elections is left to the people's desire, and what the concerned parties agree on». This confirms that the religious authority does not mind postponing the elections until better conditions are established.

Repercussions of continuing and postponing the elections

Undoubtedly, if the Shiite forces agree on the decision to postpone the elections, Al-Kadhimi will be responsive to them. However, it is clear that



these forces suffer a clear division, and therefore, the repercussions of holding the elections on time or postponing them may be detailed as follows:

1- The repercussions of holding elections in light of the boycott: In case the endeavors to persuade al-Sadr to reverse his decision fail, with the elections taking place on their scheduled date, the following is expected:

a) Possible strengthening of al-Maliki's position: the State of Law coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki will be the biggest beneficiary of the Sadrist's withdrawal from the elections, given the decline in the chances of the Fatah Movement after its recent alliance with the clans of the South, and the weak confidence of the Shiite forces and armed factions in Ammar al-Hakim's current.

b) A deteriorating security situation: the possibilities of impeding the course of the elections are increasing in the regions and districts of the withdrawing forces, particularly the Sadrist movement. Protests are also expected to return to the streets in Central and Southern Iraq after the elections.

c) The emergence of a new partisan map: changes are likely to occur on the map of political balances, with growing opportunities to regroup the withdrawn

and boycotting political currents into a new alliance under al-Sadr's leadership.

2- Implications of postponing elections: The chances of postponing the elections are equal to those of holding them on time, according to the currently available data. Al-Kadhimi may head for postponing the elections until early next year, or April 2022, which is the constitutional date scheduled for them. In this case, the impact of the postponement on the Iraqi scene will be as follows:


a) Bypassing the anti-Kadhimi Shiite forces: postponing the elections will ease the pressure exerted by the Pro-Iran Shiite forces against Al-Maliki, as they are pressing to hold the next elections, despite the boycott of Al-Sadr, to overthrow Al-Kadhimi and lead the political scene.

b) Enhancing Al-Kadhimi's chances in running for a new term: it is possible that unannounced understandings may be established between Al-Kadhimi and some of the currents supporting his policies, led by the Sadr movement, regarding Al-Kadhimi's candidacy for the upcoming elections, particularly in light of the Iraqi public support for him, as well as the regional, Arab and international support he enjoys, specifically by the US and France.

The fate of the upcoming elections in Iraq faces equal possibilities, between proceeding on the specified date and the possible postponement. Notably, the postponement of the elections may provide the time necessary to make all the technical and logistical arrangements needed for the elections, in addition to the time needed for attending to the legal obstacles that cannot be bypassed, including the appeals submitted by some political forces before the Federal Supreme Court regarding some clauses of the Iraqi Parliamentary Elections Law, which need time to amend, should those appeals be accepted.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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