

In Southern Iraq, protesters welcome election results with mixed feelings

Nasiriyah, in Iraq's poor southern heartland, has been at the epicentre of protests since the revolution of October 2019. Recent parliamentary elections, held nationwide on October 10, are unlikely to answer the demands of the city's demonstrators who are still seeking justice for the bloody crackdown on their movement.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

In October 2019, thousands took to the streets across Baghdad and southern Iraq to march against deep-seated corruption, poor governance, and foreign interferences. The protest movement forced out in May 2020 the then-Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and triggered new elections which took place on October 10.¹

Final results are yet to be announced, and some militant groups have demanded a recount and threatened to reject the outcome of the elections. Yet, it is close to certain that the next government will be largely formulated by populist Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr who is set to have the largest bloc in parliament with more than 70 seats.²

1 "Iraqi protesters helped spur new elections. But many doubt their votes will matter". NPR, October 2021.

2 "The longer Iraq's election results take, the less meaningful they may become". The National, October 2021.

Results were welcomed with mixed feelings by the demonstrators who provoked these early elections. “We protested against corruption, unemployment, and inefficient public services. These are still our demands today,” 34-year-old civil activist from Nasiriyah, Ibrahim Turki, told the BIC. “Surely, to obtain change through elections is a long-term process,” he added.

Others said they were pleased to see figures of the protest movement successfully run for office. “Our presence in the streets has achieved something we dreamed about, which is the presence in parliament of someone who truly represents us,” Hayder Ahmed, who has taken part in the protests since 2019, told the BIC.

This unemployed 30-year-old referred to the victory of Alaa al-Rikabi and his political party “Imtidad” which won nine seats. A doctor from Nasiriyah, al-Rikabi formed his party in 2019 during the uprising and treated some of the wounded as more than 600 people were killed by militias and security forces during the demonstrations.³

Protesters interviewed by the Brussels International Center said that prosecuting the people responsible for the bloody crackdown remains one of their main demands. “We still need to achieve justice and see these killers be brought to justice,” said Hayder Ahmed. “We are ready to demonstrate again if the need arises.”

Nasiriyah is a mausoleum. Every nook and cranny is adorned with portraits honouring the dead. In the early morning hours, when the southern city is still sleepy, its streets are inhabited with more ghosts than living. There are the sun-faded photos of the victims of the war against the Islamic State group (ISIS), recently joined by the victims of another conflict.

The Al-Zaitoon (“olive”) bridge was nicknamed al-Shuhada (“martyrs”) since some twenty protesters were killed there by the security forces in late 2019. In the Al-Jazira district, on the eastern bank, a massive building under construction was used as a canvas to stencil the faces of silenced dissidents: Safaa Al-Saray, an icon of the uprising, killed by a tear gas projectile while demonstrating in Baghdad. Hisham al-Hashemi, a renowned researcher, shot dead in front of his home by masked men.

³ “How newly elected Alaa al-Rikabi wants to reform Iraq”. NPR, October 2021.

Sajjad Al-Mishrifawi, an activist from Nasiriyah, missing since he was abducted by militiamen.

Three streets away, in Al-Habboubi Square, the fences of the traffic circle are decorated with pictures of the victims of the repression. A few words written in large red letters ask: "Who killed me?".

On Jihad Street, a commercial artery taken over by passers-by as dusk falls on the city, a wooden chest was placed on the asphalt, topped by a broken window and an overturned flower pot. A cenotaph that holds the bloodied clothes of Abadi, a young protester who was shot at close range on the night of January 27, 2020.

"When I arrived the next morning, I saw blood and shell casings. What a horrible scene," recalled Hassan Abdulnabi, who runs a café across the street from the murder scene. "He sometimes came here for tea between two demonstrations. He didn't deserve this," the 50-year-old continued while wiping cups.

According to witnesses, the attackers were members of the Sadrist movement, which is led by Muqtada al-Sadr, the winner of the recent elections.

Other militant groups, some of which are directly backed by Iran, have also long been accused of helping crush the protest movement and being behind countless abductions and killings across the country, meticulously silencing activists and journalists.

They are known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), a paramilitary umbrella organisation initially formed during the war against ISIS that later developed into "significant security, political and economic forces that compete for power in the Iraqi state."⁴

As a result of the crackdown led by some factions within the PMF, militiamen and protesters have often been portrayed as antagonistic groups.

Yet, many Shiite fighters were present during the large-scale protests that rocked the country for two years. Like thousands of other Iraqis, they took to the streets to protest rampant corruption, unemployment, and the breakdown of public services.

⁴ "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq". Chatham House, February 2021.

Abadi had also been a member of the PMF. He had enrolled in their ranks in 2014 to fight ISIS following the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, before taking part in the protests five years later.

In a country accustomed to partisan mobilisations, Abadi and so many others had joined a unifying, and therefore unprecedented, movement.

“When I joined the PMF in 2014, then the uprising in 2019, it was with the same goal in mind: to fight for a better country,” a militiaman turned protester told the BIC.

However, being both a demonstrator and a militia supporter soon became an untenable position to be in when some protesters started aiming at Teheran. In November 2019, the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala were attacked and torched by men protesting Iran’s meddling in Iraq’s internal affairs.

“Many PMF members joined the protest movement but left when buildings were burned down and when protesters on Habboubi Square prevented a memorial for the passing of [Iranian General] Qassem Soleimani and [de-facto PMF leader] Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis [who were killed in the same American drone strike in January 2020],” Ahmed Yahya, an active PMF member who had initially joined the protest movement, told the BIC.

In Nasiriyah, others like him who joined both the PMF, and the protest movement are, on the contrary, shocked that the groups initially formed to fight ISIS have turned into an all too powerful organisation crushing anyone who gets in their way.

“My brother and I joined the PMF in 2014 to fight ISIS but he was killed in July 2015 by a sniper. Any person with a sane mind would be ashamed of what the PMF have become. My late brother would be ashamed too,” said a 25-year-old militiaman turned protester, sporting a red cap and a pitch-black beard.

“Some militias accuse us to be ‘jokers’ (a derogatory term depicting protesters as US agents), and protesters consider the militias to be the wooden puppets of Iran. But initially we all shared the same goal: to fight for the country,” another former PMF member turned protester told the BIC, requesting anonymity for security reasons.

He explained that his best friend was one of twenty protesters killed on Al-Zaitoon bridge by security forces. Like so many others, he longs for accountability but fears the day may never come.

During the 2018 national elections, in the wake of the war against ISIS, PMF networks had managed to convert “battlefield successes into ballot-box victories”⁵. However, protesters who oppose them recently had an occasion to celebrate when it appeared that the alliance of Iraqi candidates representing such Shiite militias emerged as the biggest loser in the October elections⁶.

Yet, the apparent victory of Muqtada al-Sadr – seen by many protesters as an enemy of the uprising – was a hard pill to swallow. Less than a year ago, supporters of the cleric stormed a protest camp in Nasiriyah resulting in the killing of three people while dozens more were wounded in the clashes.

“If we do not notice change with the next government, anger will be back in the streets,” warned Hayder Ahmed. “Still, we want employment, an end to foreign interventions, safety, economic prosperity, justice, and the prosecution of killers.”

Muhannad Shakir also contributed to this piece.

⁵ “Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq”. Chatham House, February 2021.

⁶ “Partial results show pro-Iran groups losing Iraq election”. Associated Press, October 2021.

About the BIC

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