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Research Article

Electoral Dynamics in post-2003 Iraq: Systemic Reforms, Security Challenges, and External Influence

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Abstract: Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq's political trajectory has been shaped by systemic reforms, security challenges, and external interventions. Parliamentary elections serve as a key measure of Iraq's democratic governance, revealing persistent issues such as electoral system debates, pre-election violence, political fragmentation, and foreign influence from actors like the US and Iran. Low voter turnout, weak election security, and recurring allegations of fraud have further eroded public trust. The protracted government formation process, driven by sectarian divisions and external meddling, has reinforced political instability. This study examines these patterns by using the process tracing method to provide a comprehensive understanding of Iraq's electoral landscape and its broader implications for governance. The election process is divided into three timelines and analyzed before, during, and after the elections. Drawing on news and reports on Iraq as well as speeches by Iraqi figures, the study argues that seven patterns embedded in systemic reforms, security challenges, and external interventions have overwhelmed Iraq's electoral processes and democratic governance since 2003.

Keywords: Parliamentary Elections, Ali al-Sistani, US, Iran, Election Security

Introduction

The trajectory of Iraq's political evolution, especially since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, has been marked by a complex interplay of systemic reforms, security challenges, and external interventions. Central to this narrative are the parliamentary elections, which serve as a focal point for assessing Iraq's electoral processes and democratic governance. These elections, from 2005 to the more recent ones in 2018, reveal deep-seated issues ranging from allegations of fraud and systemic inequities to the pervasive impact of violence and foreign intervention. From debates over electoral systems and rising violence to political fragmentation, external interference, and allegations of fraud, Iraq's post-2003 elections have been a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by the nation. This study explores the multifaceted dynamics shaping Iraq's electoral landscape, underpinned by historical, legal, and socio-political factors from 2005 through 2018. The dynamics generated by the Tishreen (October) uprising in 2019, which

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culminated in the resignation of the Adil Abdul Mahdi government, lie beyond the scope of this study.

The first pattern concerning the Iraqi elections can be seen in the debates over Iraq's electoral system since 2003. After allegations of Kurdish overrepresentation in the 2005 interim elections, Iraq shifted from a single district to a province/district-based electoral system. The 2010 elections sparked disputes over seat allocation for the Iraqi diaspora, primarily Sunni Arabs, as their reserved seats were reduced. Meanwhile, Kurdish politicians favored a return to the single-district system, which would benefit their voter turnout, but the multi-district system was retained with increased seats for the Kurdish region. Before the 2018 elections, debates arose amid internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the aftermath of the DAESH (al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham). Kurdish and Sunni groups sought delays, while Shiite groups opposed them, pointing to political advantages. Ultimately, the Federal Supreme Court ruled that postponement was unconstitutional.

The pattern of rising violence ahead of the Iraqi elections underscores the country's fragile security environment and deep-seated divisions. Key elections, including those in 2005, 2014, and 2018, were marked by instability and threats from insurgent groups such as DAESH, exacerbating sectarian tensions and impacting voter participation. The 2005 elections saw the rise of cultural identity politics and sectarian voting, weakening a unified Iraqi identity. Systematic exclusion of Sunni Arabs by the Maliki government fueled protests and violence, with clashes like the Hawija incident deepening distrust (Wimmen, 2014, p. 12). The rise of the DAESH in 2013 further destabilized Iraq, leading to significant territorial losses and the formation of the Hashd al-Shaabi or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to counter insurgents. However, the PMF's actions raised fears among Sunni communities, complicating election security. The 2014 and 2018 elections reflected similar challenges, as the DAESH's threats and militia activities created an atmosphere of fear. Millions of IDPs and unresolved sectarian divides further strained the electoral process.

The persistent fragmentation and division within Iraq's political alliances highlight the third pattern in Iraq's post-2003 elections. Initially, coalitions such as the United Iraqi Alliance and the Kurdish Alliance displayed a degree of unity, but this alignment quickly gave way to increasing fragmentation. The 2010 elections marked a turning point as political divisions deepened among Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Subsequent elections, particularly in 2014 and 2018, revealed

even greater fragmentation. Shiite coalitions multiplied, reflecting internal power struggles and competing leaderships. Sunni Arab factions splintered into multiple coalitions, while Kurdish alliances fractured, with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) running separately and new opposition parties emerging. The fragmentation of the political blocs revealed that no coalition was able to form a majority government. The government formation process required compromises among the political leaders. As a result, this process operationalized Muhasasa power-sharing arrangements, whereby ethno-religious affinities determine "who is in power or how power is shared among different groups" (Dodge, 2012, pp. 113-116).

The fourth pattern, the involvement of internal and external actors in Iraq's post-2003 elections, underscores the complexities of its political landscape. Internally, Shiite religious authority Ali al-Sistani emerged as a pivotal figure, leveraging his moral influence to shape the country's political direction. His rejection of divisive figures such as Nouri al-Maliki and his advocacy for candidates capable of achieving social consensus highlight his role as a stabilizing force amid Iraq's volatile politics. Externally, both the US and Iran played significant roles in influencing Iraq's elections, reflecting their competing agendas. Iran sought to consolidate Shiite political dominance and maintain Iraq within its sphere of influence, as evidenced by the efforts of General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, and Ali Akbar Velayati to shape alliances and undermine candidates seen as unfavorable to Tehran. Conversely, the US shifted its support over time, aligning with leaders like Haider al-Abadi to counter the influence of pro-Iran militias and prevent the resurgence of extremist groups like the DAESH. The US sought to mediate pre-election negotiations through figures like Brett McGurk, reflecting its vested interest in ensuring an Iraqi government that aligned with its regional policies.

Iraq's elections highlight low voter turnout and weak election security. Despite efforts to integrate Sunni Arabs into the political process after their initial exclusion in 2005, sectarian differences and political marginalization deepened, fueling resentment and contributing to instability. Prime Minister Maliki's sectarian policies, reliance on security measures, and consolidation of power alienated Sunnis and Kurds, worsening the political divide and fostering the emergence of insurgent groups like the DAESH. Election security also emerged as a critical issue. The Iraq High Election Commission (IHEC), intended to ensure transparency, was compromised by partisan influences and allegations of fraud, particularly in the 2018 elections (Hasan, 2018). Electronic voting systems, introduced to prevent fraud, faced criticism for their lack of transparency and reliability, further eroding

public trust. By the 2018 elections, Iraq faced record-low voter turnout, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the entrenched political elite.

Each election cycle has witnessed recurring allegations of fraud and manipulation, the sixth pattern of this study, from political parties and coalitions. From claims of voting irregularities during the 2005 elections to the contentious vote recounts of 2010 and the introduction of electronic voting systems in 2014 and 2018, election management has consistently faced challenges. The 2018 elections, in particular, exemplified these tensions, as electronic systems were criticized for their lack of reliability, leading to allegations of pre-programmed fraud and even a fire that destroyed a significant portion of the ballots. The subsequent manual recounts confirmed minimal changes to the results, but the controversies exposed the fragility of Iraq's electoral system.

The government formation process in Iraq has been consistently protracted with both domestic and international complexities. Each election witnessed significant delays in establishing governments, often exacerbated by disputes over leadership, power-sharing arrangements, and ministerial appointments. The 2005 and 2010 elections revealed the deep sectarian rifts in Iraqi politics, with Sunni, Kurdish, and Shiite factions often at odds. External powers played a critical role in mediating or influencing these negotiations, as seen in US and Iranian efforts to steer outcomes in favor of their respective interests. By 2014, internal discontent and external pressure culminated in the replacement of Maliki with Abadi, signaling a shift driven by domestic opposition and a loss of support from key allies. The 2018 elections further illustrated the enduring patterns of external interference and internal fragmentation. Political instability and public protests highlighted the Iraqi people's growing frustration with foreign influence and ineffective governance. The eventual selection of Adil Abdul Mahdi as prime minister came through a compromise brokered by regional and international players, underscoring the persistent external role in Iraq's domestic affairs.

Before the Elections

Election laws

Debates around the reform of the electoral system have been a consistent feature in post-2003 Iraq. The perception that the Kurds had won too many seats in the October 2005 interim elections due to fraud by many Shiite politicians led to the change of the electoral system in the December 2005 parliamentary elections. A single-district electoral system that considers Iraq one single electoral district was

replaced with the province/district electoral system to prevent the suspicion that the over-representation situation would reoccur in the elections. Relatedly, the United Nations (UN) voiced that the abandonment of the province-based electoral system would harm the representation of minorities and opposed changing the electoral system so close to the elections. That said, some additional mechanisms were subsequently established to benefit minorities and small parties (O'Sullivan & al-Saiedi, 2014, p. 18). Besides, the 2010 elections were preceded by disagreements over the election law that began to be discussed in 2009. The existing election law included a provision that was detrimental to Iraqis who had to live outside the country, as the majority of the Iraqi diaspora were two million Sunni Arabs. More specifically, the reduction of the number of seats reserved for this group from 45 to 16, with 8 of these being reserved for various minority groups, provoked a reaction from Sunni Arab politicians, while the total number of seats was increased from 275 to 325 (Beck & Fangalua, 2010).

The debates around the electoral law were in circulation during the 2014 parliamentary elections. Five months before the elections, the Iraqi parliament adopted an amendment to the electoral law in November 2013. Kurdish parliamentarians favored a return to the single-district electoral system used in the 2005 referendum. The single-district electoral system would have been beneficial for the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), as voter turnout there typically exceeds that of other areas in the country. As a result, Kurdish parties would have gained a comparatively larger share of votes. Ultimately, the system implemented in 2010, which divided Iraq into multiple districts, was adopted with several modifications. The number of parliamentary seats was increased by three to a total of 328, with all additional seats allocated to the KRI (Wehler-Schöck, 2014, p. 3).

An election law debate reoccurred on the eve of the 2018 parliamentary elections. The most controversial aspect of the debate between two different opinions was related to the election date. On the one hand, Sunni Arabs, Turkmens, the KDP, and the PUK advocated postponing the election for a year because of the existence of 2.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs), the unprecedented spread of uncontrolled weapons, and the fight against DAESH in the provinces of Anbar and Nineveh, where Sunni Arabs densely resided (Aslan & Aljumaily, 2018, pp. 4-5; Bolus & Carter, 2018; Sowell, 2017). Besides, the KDP and PUK favored delaying the elections as they lost popularity due to the worsening economy and the non-payment of officers' salaries in the KRI, while Baghdad government forces regained control of Kirkuk and other disputed areas in October 2017, following the independence referendum for the KRI. On the other hand, most of the Shiite

political forces opposed postponing the election as they would benefit from popularity stemming from the mobilization of Shiite armed groups against DAESH (Aslan & Aljumaily, 2018, pp. 4-5; Al-Sadoon, 2018, p. 9). Ultimately, the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court concluded that the postponement of the elections was unconstitutional, putting an end to the debate over the election date.

Another debate around the election law occurred on the eve of the 2018 parliamentary elections. This debate was tied to seat allocation, based on the different adaptations of Iraq's use of the Sainte-Laguë method for translating votes into parliamentary seats. The method was first used in the 2013 provincial elections in Iraq, allowing small parties to win a significant number of seats. However, in the 2014 parliamentary elections, leaders of large blocs modified the method by raising the initial divisor from 1.0 to 1.6 (Duman & Aygün, 2018, p. 3). President Fuad Masum offered to modify Iraq's Sainte-Laguë formula by proposing to use a divisor of 1.5 for half of the seats in each province and distribute the remaining seats to the candidates who received the most votes. Shiite factions, except for Sadr, rejected Masum's proposal since it allowed the individual vote provision, benefiting strong local organizations like factions of the Sadrist Movement and Masum's PUK (Sowell, 2017). As a result, the same method was used in the 2018 parliamentary elections, with a quotient of 1.7. This change made it more difficult for independent candidates and small parties to secure seats, as the rise in the quotient increased the number of votes required to elect a member of parliament. Therefore, this change put the large blocs in a more advantageous position (Duman & Aygün, 2018, p. 3).

The new electoral law was adopted before the 2021 early parliamentary elections. First, it established district-based constituencies instead of province-based ones. Under this law, provinces were divided into multi-seat districts, allocating one seat for every 100,000 residents. Second, it introduced the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, which operated within each multi-seat district as a first-past-the-post system. Candidates with the highest number of votes won the seats in each district, eliminating the need for a seat allocation system. Consequently, the law gave voters direct control over candidate selection, addressing the demands of protesters. Overall, it prevents popular politicians from using their vote share to allocate seats to other candidates on their list who did not secure seats outright in the polls. Organized groups that successfully motivated their supporters to vote secured a larger number of seats due to the low turnout. More specifically, the political significance of tribes—one of the key dynamics in Iraqi social structure —

was highlighted by the advantages of the election system (Stewart-Jolley, 2021, pp. 21-22; Duman, 2021; Abdo, 2021, p. 4).

Finally, on March 26, 2023, the Iraqi parliament adopted a new election law, which was drafted and supported by the Coordination Framework, an umbrella body that included Maliki, Abadi, Ameri, Hakim, and PMU chairman Falih Al-Fayyadh. The reimplementation of the Sainte-Laguë proportional representation system gave candidates on lists, particularly those affiliated with large, well-organized political parties, a significant advantage. It reverted to the previous structure of 18 electoral districts and utilized the list-based/ Modified Sainte-Laguë method with an initial divisor of 1.7. This change further complicated opportunities for smaller parties to succeed in the elections. Under this system, a candidate from a list can be favored over an independent candidate even if the former receives fewer individual votes, as long as the list itself garners more total votes. For example, a list with five candidates each receiving 2,000 votes would be prioritized over an independent candidate with fewer than 10,000 votes, since independent candidates must compete against the total votes received by a list. The new election law has reduced the number of electoral districts from 83 to 18, consolidating each province into a single electoral district. This change ensures that political parties with candidates receiving the most votes in any district secure seats (Aygün, 2023; Al-Khazraji, 2024, p. 3). In the October 2021 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Nation State Forces, led by Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim of the National Wisdom Movement, amassed over 60,000 votes across Baghdad's 17 electoral districts, more than the total of three parties that won seats. Had the Sainte-Laguë method been in effect, the Alliance of Nation State Forces would have earned five seats from Baghdad (Aygün, 2024).

The atmosphere of fear

The second pattern related to the Iraqi elections is that rising violence prevailed ahead of the elections. Iraq held two significant elections in 2005; interim and permanent parliamentary elections. These elections played a critical role in shaping the new constitution and the foundations of the federal system. However, the 2005 parliamentary elections were held amid intense violence and instability, with 200,000 people involved in various militia organizations (Smith, 2018). The 2005 uprising in Iraq slowed down the economy alarmingly, preventing reconstruction and alienating regional and international aid (Marr, 2006, p. 27). The December 2005 elections had two consequences. First, Iraq, an apparently monolithic country with a nationalist orientation during the Baath period, shifted

to cultural identity politics. Second, the voting behavior was based on ethnic and sectarian divisions. The sense of Iraqi identity weakened (Marr, 2006, p. 32; International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 29).

The systematic discrimination and exclusion of Sunni Arabs in provinces such as Anbar by the Maliki government (2006–2014) led Sunni Arabs to protest against the Maliki government. Their demonstrations reached their peak in December 2012 when Iraqi security forces searched the home of Finance Minister Rafi Issawi and arrested his guards. Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Sunni areas, where security forces took a harsh stance on the protesters. In April 2013, the crisis deepened when security forces forcibly entered protest tents in the Hawija region near Kirkuk, resulting in the deaths of 40 demonstrators. Ongoing conflicts between Sunni and Shiite groups and Iraqi security forces have led to a resumption of violence. In addition, the deepening of the Syrian Civil War has paved the way for DAESH to grow stronger in Anbar and surrounding provinces. A large number of Sunni militias have joined DAESH. Sectarian tensions resurfaced violently in mid-2013 (Wehler-Schöck, 2014, pp. 2-3).

The fact that DAESH took over one-third of the country brought it to the brink of chaos. The decline of the Iraqi security forces against DAESH not only indicated the failure of the Iraqi security forces but also caused a decline in Maliki's popularity in political circles (Isakhan, 2017, p. 272). To reverse the collapse of the security sector, Maliki, despite his opposition to militia structures, decided to use them, primarily the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuheda. Maliki issued the prime ministerial decree that established the Hashd al-Shaabi Council, violating Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution, which prohibits the establishment of "armed militias outside the armed forces" (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 5-9). Consequently, the 2014 parliamentary elections took place during a period of increasing violence. DAESH threatened to target election centers, election officials, and people supporting the "Shiite government," whose members DAESH designated as the rulers of Iran's Shiite Safavid Dynasty (Ali, 2014, p. 9, 43; Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 5-9). Last but not least, more than 400,000 civilians have then been displaced in clashes between Iraqi security forces and DAESH in Anbar. Relatedly, the IHEC announced it would not set up ballot boxes in some parts of Anbar due to the unfavorable security situation (Wehler-Schöck, 2014, pp. 2-3).

The 2018 parliamentary elections were the first elections scheduled after the protests calling for the reform of the political system in 2015 and the territorial defeat of DAESH claimed by the Abadi government in 2017 (Mansour, 2018).

According to official figures from UN agencies, there are around 2.5 million IDPs in Iraq due to the destruction caused during the fight against DAESH (UNICEF, 2018, p. 34). The elections took place just after the independence referendum for the KRI in September 2017, which challenged Iraq's territorial integrity (Palani et al., 2019). Iraqi security forces faced the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)'s Peshmerga forces stationed in disputed areas after the referendum. However, there was no large-scale conflict because of the withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces (Chulov, 2017). One can say that, as in the previous elections, the atmosphere of fear was influential before the 2018 elections. Continuing its activities underground, DAESH threatened to attack election centers and punish runners and voters with death. In this context, it executed two election advocates in Saladin province (Hadi, 2018a; Reuters, 2018a). Secondly, the emergence of the PMF during the fight against DAESH created an atmosphere of fear in Iraq (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 9-22). Charged with providing security in some Sunni regions, the PMF reportedly engaged in illegal activities in these regions, acting as a non-state armed actor (Balcı et al., 2016, p. 142; İpek, 2022; Daoud, 2018). Finally, DAESH announced that it would target those who voted in the election immediately before the 2018 elections (Middle East Monitor, 2018a). Even several attacks on candidates and election officials were claimed by DAESH (Blaxter & Eissa, 2018).

The fragmentation of political alliances

The third pattern concerning the Iraqi elections is the fragmentation and division within political alliances. In post-2003 Iraq, 228 parties and 19 coalitions competed in the first election. The United Iraqi Alliance, the Shiite political coalition, won 128 seats in the 275-seat parliament with 41% of the vote, while the Kurdish Alliance, led by the PUK and KDP, won 53 seats with 21%. On the other hand, the Sunni Arabs did not enter the elections as a single entity. While their largest party, the Iraqi Tawafuq Front, won 44 seats with 15% of the vote, the other Sunni parties —the Iraqi National Dialogue Front won 11 seats, the Reconciliation and Freedom Bloc won 3 seats, and the Iraqi National List won 1 seat. Thus, another election coalition led by secular Arabs, the al-Iraqiyya List, won 40 seats (İnat, 2006, pp. 75-76; Marr, 2012, p. 298; O'Sullivan & al-Saiedi, 2014, pp. 12-13). Overall, the political coalitions and parties (except for Sunni Arabs) allied in the 2005 elections. However, they would remain on a collision course, and their alignment would be obliged to dissolve in the later elections.

A series of alliances were formed before the 2010 parliamentary elections. The Shiite bloc was divided into two coalitions: the Iraqi National Alliance included the

Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, the Sadr Movement, former Prime Minister Ja'fari's Islah Party, and several other smaller Shiite parties; another Shiite-dominated alliance was the State of Law Coalition led by Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki. The al-Iraqiyya coalition, led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, included secular Shiite and many Sunni groups. In addition to these alliances, the Tawafuq (Reconciliation) list, which included various Sunni Islamic groups and parties, weakened after President Tariq Hashemi, who left the Iraqi Islamic Party, established the Renewal List. The 2010 elections generated opposition to the KDP/PUK duopoly on the Kurdish front: the Gorran Movement and Services and Reform. The first list emerged from internal turmoil within the PUK, driven by a power struggle over Jalal Talabani's succession. The second list comprised four parties: the dominant ones were Islamist parties while the other two were small Suleimaniya-based secular socialist parties (Hiltermann, 2010; Colleau, 2014; Özcan, 2011, p. 51). Therefore, the fragmentation and division of political alliances within the three factions began in the 2010 elections. If we compare the 2010 and 2014 elections, we observe that coalitions and political parties have increased. While 12 coalitions and 74 political parties entered the 2010 elections, 35 coalitions and 72 political parties entered the 2014 elections. Secondly, the increasing number of candidates points to fragmentation and division among political alliances. While approximately 7,000 candidates competed in the 2010 elections, 9,040 candidates contended for 328 seats in the 2014 elections (Abdulhussein, 2014).

The fragmentation and division of political alliances within the three ethnic and sectarian factions continued in the 2014 elections. Maliki's divide-and-rule strategy polarized Iraq's political atmosphere, deepening the fragmentation and division of political alliances (Wehler-Schöck, 2014, p. 4). Iran even failed to unite Shiites under a single coalition. There were three Shiite coalitions: the State of Law Coalition, the Ahrar Bloc led by Sadr, and the Citizens Coalition (Mouwatin) headed by Hakim, the chairman of the Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) (Ali, 2014, p. 22). The National Coalition (Wataniyya) emerged from the previous Iraqiyya Coalition and was led by Ayad Allawi. On the Sunni Arab front, the Uniting for Reform (Moutahidoun) Coalition, the largest Sunni bloc, emerged from parts of the previous Iraqiyya and was led by Usama Nujaifi. The second faction, Arabiyya, disintegrated from the Iraqiyya Coalition and was headed by Saleh Mutlaq. Sunni businessman Khamis Khanjar founded the third faction, the Dignity (Karama) Alliance. On the Kurdish side, after competing as the Kurdish Alliance in the previous elections, the KDP and the PUK ran individually in most provinces in the

2014 elections. Gorran remained a third actor in the Kurdish political landscape (Wehler-Schöck, 2014, pp. 4-6). The other Kurdish factions, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), received 4 and 5 seats in the elections, respectively (Ali, 2014, p. 9).

Iraq's political landscape remained fragmented in the 2018 parliamentary elections (Mansour & Van Den Toorn, 2018, p. 12). Shiite parties entered the elections within five major coalitions. Abadi and Maliki, members of the Dawa Party, ran individually on two separate lists. Abadi founded the Victory (Nasr) Coalition by resorting to the gains his government achieved in the fight against DAESH, which was criticized by the Shiite religious authority Sistani due to Abadi's abuse of the fight. The third Shiite faction was the Fateh Alliance, led by the Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri and several leaders from the predominantly Shiʿa Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that emerged during the fight against DAESH (Basnews, 2018). The fourth Shiite faction was Hakim's National Wisdom Movement. Finally, the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairuun Coalition united his Shiite Islamist followers and the Iraqi Communist Party. The Sunni community split into three factions. Ayad Allawi, Salem al-Jubori, and Salih al-Mutlaq formed the National Coalition alongside several Sunni Arab leaders. Meanwhile, Osama Al-Nujaifi and his brother Atheel al-Nujaifi established the Iraqi Decision Alliance along with other powers (al Khafaji, 2018). The last faction, Sunni businessman Khamis al-Khanjar's Uniters for Reform Coalition, ran for Sunni Arab votes. Political division among Kurds after the failed independence referendum was more pronounced than ever. The PUK and KDP joined the elections on separate electoral lists. In addition to the oppositionist Gorran Movement, newer "protest" parties, Barham Salih's Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) and Shashwar Abdulwahid's New Generation (NG) contested the poll, trying to benefit from widespread discontent in the KRI. Salih split from the PUK after three decades with the party to form CDJ. As the owner of NRT TV station, Abdulwahid significantly challenged the mainstream KDP and PUK media outlets. The Islamic parties on the Kurdish side, KIG and KIU, ran individually in the elections (Mansour & Van Den Toorn, 2018. p. 15).

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, 23 political alliances participated. The Shiite groups formed seven separate political coalitions, while Sunni Arabs ran under five electoral lists. For Kurds, the KDP entered the elections independently, whereas the PUK and Gorran Movement united to create the Kurdistan Alliance. Additionally, the New Generation Movement and Kurdistan Justice Group represented smaller Kurdish parties in the elections. Even more significantly, the October uprising in

2019 provided an opportunity for protest movements, such as the Imtidad Movement, and 43 independents to gain entry into the parliament. The boycott of the Sadr Movement in the 2023 provincial elections affected voter turnout, as the movement received only 10 percent of the votes. The Nebni Coalition, led by the Badr Organization and the Sadiqun Bloc—known for their ties to Iran—secured 43 out of 285 seats in the provincial councils, while the State of Law Coalition won 35 seats. Following them, the Takaddum Coalition, led by Iraqi Parliament Speaker Halbusi, who was removed from office before the elections, gained 21 seats. Lastly, the National Coalition of State Forces, headed by Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim, received 23 seats, achieving results similar to their vote count in the 2021 elections (Aygün, 2024; Abdo, 2021, pp. 7-8).

Foreign and domestic intervention in the elections

When political parties and blocs are heading into elections, internal and external actors are involved in supporting their favorite candidate(s). The most significant internal actor is the Shiite religious authority Sistani, who had kept away from giving speeches about politics during the Saddam Hussein regime. Although Sistani did not occupy an official position in Iraq, he emerged as a key player in the post-2003 Iraqi political order (Al-Qarawee, 2018). Stating that religious and political authority should be separate, Sistani did not want political conflict between parties or states to harm his religious institutions (Mamouri, 2014). He wished for Iraq's decision-making process to be independent of regional and international interference. He has had "soft power," which, "in moments of turmoil, changes the course of the country's history with a single statement" (Braam, 2010, p. 6). On balance, Sistani's voice was heard clearly from 2008 to 2009, especially in the run-up to the 2010 parliamentary elections (Braam, 2010, p. 15).

As the Iraqi parliament was debating the election laws in July 2013, the Shiite religious authority Sistani did not endorse a proposed closed-list electoral system because it favored the major parties and was against the voters. The parliament passed the open-list electoral system in November 2013 (Ali, 2014, p. 22). Sistani's second internal intervention in the 2014 parliamentary elections came with his statement regarding Maliki's third term as prime minister (Kalaycı & Gürler, 2014, p. 16). Sistani said that Iraq was going through difficult conditions and called on the people to vote for the rulers who would change these conditions. Although Maliki's name was not mentioned, many Iraqis referred to Maliki. In particular, this situation manifested itself in Sistani's rejection of Maliki's offer to meet with him when he visited Najaf ahead of the 2014 elections (Ali, 2014, p. 22). On this

occasion, Iraqi politicians tried to gain Sistani's support for the elections. Prime Minister Abadi saw the US and Sistani as a balancing element in confronting Iran (Mamouri, 2014). After taking office as prime minister, Abadi met with Sistani on October 20. Sistani stated that his support would continue as long as Abadi could achieve social consensus and overcome the country's weaknesses (Al-Kadhimi, 2014).

Sistani was also involved in the 2018 pre-election debates. He released a political message stating that high-ranking figures in the previous governments had abused their powers and contributed to the spread of corruption, implying the fall of Mosul. Even more significantly, Sistani addressed Iraqis to avoid falling into the traps of unsuccessful and corrupt rulers (Reuters, 2018b). Sistani's public political message curbed the votes for Maliki from 92 seats in the 2014 elections to 26 seats in the 2018 elections. A week before the 2018 elections, Sistani also declared that no one should use religious references for votes, referring to pro-Iranian al-Amiri's Fatah Alliance. Finally, Sistani called for participation in the 2021 early parliamentary elections, while proclaiming several characteristics that candidates must have to receive support. Some Iraqis believed that the candidates would be unable to have these characteristics, leading them to conclude that it would be better not to vote (Al-Sadoon, 2021, p. 22; Duman, 2021, p. 20).

For their part, external actors, the US and Iran, also lobbied for the elections for their favorite prime minister candidate. Before the 2018 parliamentary elections, Qasem Soleimani, the key figure in Iran's policy in neighboring Arab countries, arrived in Iraq to convince Maliki to stay out of the next government and persuade most other Shiite forces—the Fatah Alliance, the National Wisdom Movement, and the ISCI—to join the Victory coalition formed by then Prime Minister Abadi. Moreover, public opinion surveys showing Abadi's favorability before the 2018 elections pushed Soleimani to meet with the KDP leader Barzani in search of convincing the KDP to prevent Abadi's second term as Prime Minister (Aljazeera, 2018a).

Iran's interference in the 2018 elections continued with the visit of Ali Akbar Velayeti, the senior advisor on international affairs for the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, to Iraq before the elections. He met with the pro-Iran political party leaders Maliki, Hakim, and Hadi al-Amiri. Velayeti strived to gather the Shiite political groups under a single coalition, as the participation of the conflicting Shiite factions in the 2018 elections could lead to the formation of a government countering Iran's interests in Iraq. Besides, Velayeti could not meet with Sistani in

al-Najaf, due to Iran's meddling in Iraqi internal affairs (Shafaq News, 2018). During his meeting with Maliki, Velayeti stated that "the Islamic awakening will not allow the return of communists and liberals to power!" referring to an alliance between the Sadrist Movement and the Iraqi Communist Party, demonstrating Iran's interest in the government formation process (Hussein, 2018).

The political actors that the US supports in Iraq vary depending on US policy toward Baghdad. While the US supported Maliki in the pre-DAESH period in Iraq, it withdrew support from Maliki and backed Haidar Abadi as a result of the expansion of DAESH in Syria and Iraq (Marr, 2012, pp. 320-322). Following the territorial defeat of DAESH, the US continued its support for Abadi against the revival of DAESH and to contain Iran and pro-Iranian Shiite militias. Accordingly, the US supported Iraqi political actors who could act in line with this policy. Abadi's attempts to bring the PMF under state authority aligned with US policy toward Iraq. Therefore, the US supported Abadi's second term as Prime Minister (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 5-22). The US, thus, intervened in the pre-election political negotiations through Brett McGurk, the top American envoy for the US-led anti-DAESH coalition in Iraq and Syria who was called the "American Soleimani" in Iraq (El-Ghobashy, 2018). McGurk endeavored to persuade the KDP and some Sunni politicians to keep the PMF candidates out of the next government (Aljazeera, 2018a).

During the Elections

Election security and low turnout

The 11-month period between the January 2005 interim and December 2005 parliamentary elections witnessed many events. Despite efforts to reduce the impact of the Sunni Arab community's exclusion from political institutions in the first elections, political attitudes and sectarian differences hardened during these 11 months. Iraqis completed their draft constitution during this period, which barely passed in parliament. The majority of Sunni Arabs, who were not keen on the introduction of a federal system, believed that the constitution would diminish the importance of Iraq's Arab character. Sunni Arabs, who were excluded from the political process, acted against the political system. Some Sunni Arab tribes even started an uprising. After realizing that staying out of the political process did not benefit them, Sunni Arab politicians reversed their decision and engaged in the new Iraqi order (O'Sullivan & al-Saiedi, 2014, pp. 17-18). The boycott of the 2005 general elections by Sunni Arabs, who had less than 25% participation in the interim parliamentary elections, could have rapidly increased the spiral of

instability in Iraq. As a result of the efforts of the US and Türkiye to integrate Sunnis into the political system, Sunni Arabs participated widely in the December 2005 parliamentary elections (İnat, 2006, pp. 74-75).

The 2010 parliamentary elections saw a 62% turnout. The low turnout was due to the inadequacy of public services and the exclusion of Sunni Arabs. Since 2007, Maliki has increased his control over the army and security forces by appointing loyal people and bypassing the institutional structure. He capitalized on the Accountability and Justice Law regarding de-Baathification. The Accountability and Justice Commission, charged with stopping former Ba'ath party loyalists from returning to public life, outlawed dozens of candidates. The participation of some committee members with the Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of Shiite religious parties, in the elections drew significant criticism (Özcan, 2011, p. 54; Chulov, 2010). Maliki's sectarian politics pushed Sunni Arabs out of politics and led them to boycott elections. The exclusion of Sunni Arabs from both politics and state institutions paved the way for terrorist organizations such as the DAESH.

Three years after the withdrawal of American troops, the 2014 parliamentary elections highlighted two particularly significant challenges: rampant sectarian polarization and escalating violence (Al-Qarawee, 2014). Prime Minister Maliki has played a significant role in entrenching a sectarian system in Iraq, disregarding the 2010 Erbil Agreement that called for power-sharing with Sunni Arabs and Kurds (Stansfield, 2013, pp. 271-272). Upon reports of serious abuses by the Iraqi army, including torture and arbitrary arrests (Arango & Gordon, 2014), Maliki framed his extensive security measures as a fight against terror while failing to acknowledge Shia violence as such. Escalating violence ahead of the elections was exacerbated by the government's harsh response to Sunni Arab protests, leading to increased resentment among them and the emergence of DAESH (International Crisis Group, 2014). Iraq faced a significant rise in violence, with the UN reporting nearly 9,000 deaths in 2013 and at least 5,576 civilians killed in the first half of 2014, along with 1.2 million internally displaced people (Colleau, 2014, p. 7). As a result, 62% of the 22 million eligible voters cast their ballot, indicating a similar turnout to the 2010 parliamentary elections.

The 2018 parliamentary elections featured a low turnout that has steadily declined since 2005, from 79 percent to 44 percent. Calls for a boycott of the polls by many clerics and civil society activists led to around 20 percent of eligible voters abstaining, which pointed to a lack of hope and trust in the Iraqi political system. The boycott calls stemmed from the 2015 protests demanding systemic change to

the political system. The demonstrations began with the instigation of leftists, secularists, and communists who have been speaking against the "Green Zone elite" since 2010 (Jabar, 2018; Musings on Iraq, 2018). In particular, the turnout in Baghdad and other southern provinces of Iraq, where the 2015 protests emerged, remained below the turnout across the country (Mansour, 2018). Boycotters lost hope in the elections since the political elite dominated the Iraqi political system and could not bring their demands for systemic change. Another reason for the low turnout in the 2018 elections was the presence of 3.2 million IDPs, compounded by the lack of efficient institutions (Mansour & Van Den Toorn, 2018, p. 20).

There were two factors indicating that election security was weak. The first factor was related to the independence of the IHEC, which is responsible for the transparency and fairness of elections in Iraq. The IHEC was established as an independent institution by the US occupation authority. However, the membership of the IHEC had eventually been divided by party quotas. Therefore, the IHEC could not act as an independent institution. For instance, the IHEC could not thoroughly address the allegations of fraud regarding electronic voting in the 2018 parliamentary elections (Hasan, 2018). The nomination of IHEC members by traditional political parties overshadowed its independence. The second reason for the weakness of election security was the allegations of fraud across the elections in general. For the 2018 elections, electronic voting and counting, instead of manual counting, weakened election security. Whereas the IHEC had declared that all kinds of fraud could be prevented with a modern and smart system (Rudaw, 2018), many political parties alleged that most of the devices were not tested before election day, that the devices were supplied by unknown foreign companies, and that interference of the electronic software of the devices took place through codes (Mansour & Van Den Toorn, 2018, pp. 18-19).

The 2021 early parliamentary elections witnessed a-record low turnout until then, with percentage of 41. The low vote turnout amplified that Iraqi people stood away from political participation and lost their hope in politics, as political conflicts, economic problems, security problems, the existence of terrorist organizations, and uncertainties in the state order alienated the people from politics. In addition, the implementation of a different election system in almost every election in Iraq confused the people and increased bureaucratic procedures. Iraqi people thought that they would yield no dramatic progress by participating in elections (Duman, 2021, pp. 19-20). After nearly a decade, Iraq held provincial elections on December 18, 2023, covering fifteen provinces, excluding those within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). These elections had been delayed or canceled due to political and

security issues. Voter turnout was notably low at 41% (Ali, 2024). This reluctance to participate in the elections was not solely a result of the Sadrists' boycott. Rather, it stemmed from a general hesitance among voters to engage in the process, including obtaining biometric election cards, with more than a third of voters not having received them (CFRI, 2023).

Endless fraud allegations

Each election in Iraq has witnessed objections and complaints (Hasan, 2018). Regarding the 2005 parliamentary elections, approximately 1,200 complaints were filed to the IHEC. Whereas the investigations did not affect the final results, the Iraqi National List and Tawafuq claimed that voting irregularities occurred in some polling stations and that the IHEC had determined the election results against the United Iraqi Alliance. In response to these claims, the IHEC, Chairman Hussein al-Hindawi, stated that most of the complaints were made for political reasons. Iyad Allawi and his supporters also claimed that the election results were manipulated and that many ballot papers were changed (Özcan, 2007, pp. 76-77). Besides, Sunni Arab leaders rejected the election results and demanded a fraud investigation, claiming that the votes were shifted in favor of pro-Iranian Shiites (Wong, 2005).

Following the 2010 parliamentary elections, as the vote counting progressed, the two rival factions that were neck and neck exchanged accusations and alleged that the elections had been rigged. Initially, Allawi accused the process of serious fraud. As the Iraqiyya coalition began to gain an advantage, Maliki also claimed there was fraud and requested a recount of the votes in five constituencies; however, the recount was only approved in Baghdad. The Iraqiyya coalition perceived the decision to recount votes in Baghdad as an undue influence of the Maliki government on the Iraqi judiciary. The goal of the recount was for both groups to secure the four additional deputies necessary to form a government. Ultimately, the recount yielded no significant changes to the election results, with election officials reporting that only 3,000 votes out of roughly 2.5 million were cast for different parties (Özcan, 2011, p. 54).

One of the patterns of Iraqi elections, allegations of election fraud, was also prevalent in the 2014 parliamentary elections. The IHEC used electronic voting cards for the first time in the elections and encountered logistical problems in distributing the cards. The use of cards in the elections raised concerns about the election process and election fraud. The distribution process was slow; therefore, the IHEC decided to extend the distribution process until 27 April 2014, just 10 days before the elections. Indeed, in the case of smart cards, there were reports that

political parties were purchasing the cards in order to gain dubious votes. However, the presence of political representatives and the fact that voters used indelible ink while voting made it challenging to manipulate the cards (Ali, 2014, p. 30).

Likewise, electronic voting and counting (a satellite-connected smart ballot box and an electronic pen) were implemented during the 2018 parliamentary elections, in which 245,000 local and 100 international observers monitored the elections throughout Iraq (Middle East Monitor, 2018b). The IHEC later lifted the requirement to vote with electronic cards to enable displaced people to vote. However, the use of the electronic system led many political parties to make allegations of fraudulent interference in the elections (Al-Monitor, 2018a). Most of the devices used in the elections were not tested before election day, and the electronic software of the devices cast a shadow over the reliability of the election (Hasan, 2018; Rudaw, 2018). Reports from election stations and collection centers revealed that election devices were pre-programmed to determine how many votes each party would receive.

Following the Iraqi parliament's decision to count the partial votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections, a fire broke out in a warehouse in the Rusafa district of Baghdad, which contained 1.1 million votes out of 1.8 million (Hadi, 2018b). After the IHEC announced that a recount could not be carried out because the votes and equipment were damaged (Mamouri, 2018; Al-Monitor, 2018b), some political coalitions and leaders called for an annulment and repetition of the elections, including the Wataniya Coalition, the State of Law Coalition, and the former parliament speaker Salim al-Cuburi. Thereby, the Iraqi parliament stipulated that if a 25% discrepancy was detected in the counting of votes, the vote count would be redone manually for all governorates under the supervision of judges (Hassan & Coker, 2018). Following the Iraqi parliament's decision to recount the votes, the IHEC Chairman Riyad Badran warned that canceling all or part of the election results could lead to civil war. The IHEC stated that the manual election process was up to the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) and the Supreme Federal Court (SFC) (Mamouri, 2018).

The SFC, expected to resolve post-election issues, rejected the IHEC's request to invalidate the Iraqi parliament's decision to abolish the electronic election count (Jawad, 2018). Evaluating the applications on June 21, the SFC ruled that the manual counting of votes was constitutional. However, the cancellation of votes from overseas and foreign voters, as well as from security forces in the KRG, was unconstitutional, and these votes would be considered accepted unless there was

evidence of fraud. The SFC decided to recount only the ballot boxes where complaints were filed instead of conducting a general count and appointed nine judges, rather than IHEC members to oversee the manual counting and sorting processes (Hadi, 2018c; Aljazeera, 2018b). Following the hand count throughout Iraq, there was no change in the results in the cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, Sulaimaniya, Diwaniyya, Musanna, Najaf, Babil, Duhok, Diyala, Karbala, Basra, Maysan, and Wasit, while there were minor changes in other cities: only one seat was transferred from the Baghdad Coalition (Sunni) to the Fatah Alliance (Shiite) in Baghdad (Karaalp, 2018).

Finally, following the defeat of some Shiite parties, their supporters protested the results of the 2021 early parliamentary elections. They set up camp in front of government headquarters and diplomatic missions to pressure the authorities to either amend the election results or conduct a manual vote count, as demanded by the Coordination Framework (Saadoon, 2021). It pointed to issues with the electronic voting system, such as failures in fingerprint recognition and technical glitches with voting machines. Despite these claims, the Federal Supreme Court ultimately ratified the election results, rejecting appeals to annul them (Rudaw, 2021). The 2023 provincial elections were also marked by allegations of fraud, particularly in Kirkuk. Reports indicated demographic manipulation, with voters transferring their registrations from other governorates to polling stations in Kirkuk (Kurdistan24, 2023).

After the Elections

A long way in government formation and foreign and domestic interference

Each election witnessed a long way in the formation of governments. For the December 2005 parliamentary elections, the final results came two months after the elections. While the negotiations for the formation of a government stretched over a long period, the bombing in Samarra caused a rift between the political parties and prolonged the negotiations. For example, some Sunni Arabs announced that they would not participate in the government formation talks unless the Shiite-dominated government apologized for the attacks on more than 90 Sunni mosques. Thus, the government formation efforts became an internal showdown based on ethnic and sectarian differences. Sunni and Kurdish groups were objecting to the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance’s insistence on Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari's second term. The failure of the government formation talks and the increasing violence troubled the US and its allies. Therefore, American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw held talks with various parties to

convince them that progress in government formation efforts was in everyone's interest (Özcan, 2007, pp. 60-61). The government formation efforts were resolved when the Shiite alliance nominated a new prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani assigned him to form the government, and the Iraqi parliament approved his government on May 20, five months after the elections.

The efforts to form a government after the 2010 parliamentary elections were more severe than those after the 2005 elections. There was very little difference between the two leading rival groups, and no group had the majority to form a government on its own. The neck and neck election results, the increasing uncertainty regarding the formation of the government, and the fears of ethnic and sectarian divisions flaring up again worried both the groups within Iraq and the neighboring countries. The main trouble was to strike a balance between the ambitions of the new political elite in Baghdad and the US efforts to find acceptable leaders to establish a stable and inclusive government to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Uncertainties regarding the formation of the government and concerns about the re-emergence of ethnic and sectarian divisions pushed regional countries to engage in Iraq's government formation talks. The countries that came to the fore in this process were Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye. Although Iran had more influence on Shia parties, Sunni Arab groups occasionally visited Iran to gain its support in forming a government. In contrast, Shia groups went to Saudi Arabia to seek support in that process (Dawn, 2010). Türkiye stated that the government to be formed should include all segments and that Sunnis needed not to be excluded from the process (Özcan, 2011, pp. 54-55).

With the influence of Iran, two Shiite coalitions, the State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance, began talks in April on forming a government. As a result of Maliki's actions against Sadr's Mahdi Army in 2008, Sadr's opposition to Maliki protracted the formation of a government. Iran led the State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance to form a government, while the US desired not to exclude Sunni groups. The US urged the Kurdish parties to support the formation of a government. In exchange for backing Maliki for another term as Prime Minister, they made a list of nineteen demands, such as the payment of the salaries of the Peshmerga by the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the implementation of Article 140 of the constitution regarding Kirkuk within two years (Katzman, 2010, p. 16). Maliki accepted them except for a few. After Jalal Talabani was re-elected as the President of Iraq, he tasked Nuri Maliki with re-establishing the government. The new government established by Nuri Maliki received a vote of confidence from the Iraqi parliament on December 21, nine months after the elections. The influence of

the US and Iran in forming a government in Iraq made the second term of the Maliki government possible. Therefore, the desire of other states to influence every government formation process is an external pattern characteristic of Iraqi elections (Ali, 2018; Mansour & Van Den Toorn, 2018, p. 12).

In the 2014 election results, no party could reach the number of deputies needed to form a government on its own coalition. Maliki's refusal to step down from his third term as Prime Minister despite the Kurds' and Sunni Arabs' opposition brought the formation of a government to a deadlock. Meanwhile, DAESH took control of many Sunni regions, especially Mosul, in June, which further increased the reactions against Maliki. In particular, Sistani did not support him. Neither Iran nor the US supported Maliki, accelerating the process of his departure. The pattern of the influence from external actors in the government formation process was evident (Ali, 2014, p. 22). Sistani's call for a new Prime Minister opened the way for Abadi's nomination to form a new Iraqi government (Reuters, 2014). The National Alliance, the largest Shiite political formation, which includes Maliki's Dawa Party, nominated Abadi as its candidate for prime minister. Thereupon, President Masum gave Abadi the task of forming a government on August 11. Maliki's reaction was quite harsh. He accused the president of violating the constitution and began preparing for a coup by placing armed forces in strategic locations in Baghdad (Kalaycı & Gürler, 2015, pp. 17-18). Unable to receive support from Iran, Maliki later accepted the new political reality. As a result, Maliki, who served two terms as prime minister between 2006 and 2014, left behind a failed state due to both his own mistakes and the policies of the US (Shabi, 2014). The Abadi government received a vote of confidence on September 8, five months after the elections.

The government formation process in Iraq had domestic and foreign dimensions. After the 2018 parliamentary elections, Iraqi political parties began their efforts to form a government in the domestic dimension; Brett McGurk and Qasem Soleimani sought to shape the government formation process (El-Ghobashy, 2018). The US favored a candidate that would balance Iran's influence in Iraq. Accordingly, the US sought to prevent Sadr from forming the government. McGurk conducted negotiations with the Kurds and strived to motivate the Kurdish parties to act as a bloc (Kurt, 2018). In addition, McGurk met with prominent Iraqi political leaders to discuss "the formation of a strong and stable Iraqi government" (The New Arab, 2018). Iran's intervention came when it cut off most of the electricity supply to southern Iraq on the grounds that Iraq did not pay its debt, which could discredit Iraq's caretaker government (Arraf, 2018). Over long-term power cuts, protests in Basra erupted against Iran's intervention and all foreign control in Iraq (Abdo,

2018). The protesters held both their own rulers and Iranian rulers responsible for the unsuccessful profiles of the successive governments in Iraq. Some protesters torched the offices of the Shiite militia groups known for links with Iran (Gürler & Danışman, 2019, p. 31).

The protests eventually spread throughout the country and became one of the obstacles to Abadi's second term (Mansour, 2019, pp. 12-13), causing the return of the political stalemate in Iraq. The Shiite religious authority Sistani untangled the stalemate by taking sides with the protesters. Sistani stated that no one in power in the past should become the next prime minister, preventing Abadi's second term before Iraq's parliament convened on the government formation. Besides, Iran withdrew its support from Abadi over his statement that Iraq would abide by US sanctions on Iran to protect its own interests (Rasheed, 2018). On the plus side, the Iraqi political elite came up with a technocratic government. The Fatah Alliance and Sadr's Sairoon coalition agreed on Adel Abdul Mahdi, a member of the ISCI, as prime minister. This political consensus was driven by a Beirut meetup of Iraqi Shiite cleric Sadr, Hezbollah leader Hasan al-Nasrallah, and Qasem Soleimani (Najmuddine, 2018). Like the previous government formation processes, the prime minister filled key ministerial posts for months as Iraq's parliament did not approve the candidates nominated for some ministries. Therefore, the government was formed without a consensus on the candidates nominated for key ministerial posts, such as for the ministry of the interior and the ministry of defense (The Middle East Eye, 2018).

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, no party or alliance won a majority. The results showed a rebalancing of power among Shiite political parties, with cleric Sadr's bloc gaining at the expense of the Al-Fatah Alliance. The Sadrist Movement won 73 seats, up from 54 in 2018. Takaddum, led by Parliament Speaker Mohammed Halbusi, won 37 seats in its first election. The State of Law Coalition came in third with 35 seats, while the KDP followed with 33 seats. Despite turmoil in the KRG, the KDP's increase in seats obtained by the KDP is notable. The Sadr Movement, State of Law Coalition, and Takaddum also gained seats compared to previous elections. Additionally, 40 independent candidates entered the Iraqi Parliament due to the adoption of district-based constituencies and the single non-transferable voting system. A significant development was the decrease in seats for the Fatah Alliance, which lost nearly two-thirds compared to 2018. This decline resulted from the militia groups' political shortcomings and their harsh stance against protesters during the 2019 unrest (Duman, 2021, p. 20). Al-Sadr initially proposed forming a 'national majority' government with Takaddum and the KDP,

aiming to exclude Shia factions led by Maliki and the Fatah Alliance. These factions, along with Fatah's allies, formed the Shia Coordination Framework, which contested the election results and government formation (Dodge, 2022). Negotiations were further complicated by divisions between the two Kurdish parties over a presidential candidate. A month after Sadr's representatives withdrew from parliament, the Coordination Framework nominated Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani for prime minister. Protests continued until his government was confirmed in October, a year after the elections (Loft, 2022, pp. 6-11).

Conclusion

This study illustrates that Iraq's post-2003 electoral dynamics exemplify a complex interplay of systemic institutional reforms, security challenges, and both domestic and external political interventions. Key patterns include debates over the electoral system, rising violence before elections, fragmentation of political coalitions, involvement of internal and external actors, weak election security and voter turnout, and allegations of fraud. Elections have been marked by low voter turnout, reflecting disillusionment with the political elite. For instance, the 2021 elections saw only 43% voter participation, continuing a decline in engagement. Debates over the electoral system and subsequent amendments have altered vote translation mechanics and reconfigured incentives for political actors. Changes from the single-district model to province-/district-based systems and adaptations of proportional representation have aimed to address distributive inequities while reinforcing entrenched sectarian and ethnic divisions. Modifications to election laws have impacted representation in parliament and transformed the government formation process. Meanwhile, ongoing violence and the threat from extremist elements have undermined electoral security and legitimacy. Pre-election violence and the manipulation of electoral operations have fostered mistrust among voters. Recurrent allegations of fraud and technical mismanagement, especially in elections using advanced electronic systems, have further eroded public trust in the electoral process.

After the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, Iraq adopted a political system based on ethno-sectarian quotas, known as the muhasasa system. While intended to ensure representation for diverse communities, it has often resulted in political gridlock and corruption. Although new electoral laws have aimed to address these issues, they often favor established political blocs over smaller parties and independents, perpetuating the dominance of traditional elites. The difficulty in forming stable governments frequently leads to prolonged political

stalemates. These challenges have sparked public protests, like the Tishreen movement, which demands systemic reforms and an end to corruption. However, meaningful change has been slow, and Iraq continues to grapple with the legacy of its post-2003 political order. The fragmentation of political alliances complicates the electoral landscape. Sectarian divisions and shifting allegiances often prioritize short-term political gains and power-sharing among disparate groups over coherent national policy. This divided political terrain, exacerbated by influential roles of internal actors—such as prominent clerical figures—and external powers, has prolonged government formation processes. The phenomenon of muhasasa politics, characterized by static power-sharing arrangements, impedes substantive reform and cements the status quo that many Iraqis distrust. The Tishreen uprising in 2019 deepened the fragmentation of political alliances. Future research should compare election cycles in other regional countries to help chart a course toward sustainable democratic transformation in contexts where historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical pressures intersect.

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