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## **Iraq: Political Dynamics in Advance of Parliamentary Elections**

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Whether the Iraqi constitution is approved or not in the October 15 referendum, there will be new elections in December for the National Assembly and party alignments are beginning to emerge. The broad political coalitions that scored a clear victory in the January 2005 elections are attempting to expand and diversify their constituencies to ensure that they remain relevant to the Iraqi political scene.

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the Shiite coalition that won more than half the parliamentary seats in January, might lose as many as 20 to 30 percent of its members due to the withdrawal of Muqtada Al Sadr's National Independent Cadres and Elites. Ultimately, the UIA's success in the upcoming elections depends on the force of a fatwa to be issued by the supreme religious guide Ayatollah Sistani. Sistani can have an enormous effect on voters, particularly in the Shiite-majority south, as demonstrated in the previous elections. The main change in the UIA's platform this time will be the new call for southern federalism.

Of all Iraqi coalitions, the Kurdish list (a coalition of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party) is the most unified and no notable changes are expected in the alliance. The success and cohesion of this list is driven by the group's shared desire to establish a state of Kurdistan that includes oil-rich Kirkuk through a process of compromise with Shiites and Sunnis.

Former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi seeks to expand his Iraqi National Accord party to include secularists, technocrats, Shiite Islamists, and Sunni tribes who boycotted the previous elections. The name of his list might be changed to "The Nation" or simply "Iraq." Allawi is attempting to distance himself from the poor image and accusations of corruption that still surround his former government, as well as to learn from mistakes in the previous elections (in which his list won only 43 of 275 seats). He represents a moderate, liberal trend preferred by many Iraqi politicians who believe his return to power could place Iraq on the path to real democracy. Many Iraqi voters, particularly Shiites, however, hold against Allawi his inclusion of some members of the dissolved Baath party in his former government.

Sunni Arabs who boycotted the vote in January are preparing to participate in the upcoming elections despite their opposition to the constitution. So far there are no clear alliances on the horizon due to the deteriorating security situation in the Sunni triangle and to the fact that, unlike Shiites and Kurds, Sunni Arabs lack a large popular base. The success of a Sunni Arab campaign would hinge on whether Sunnis can capitalize on nationalist sentiments by calling for an end to the U.S. occupation and a timetable for withdrawal. They are already attempting

to portray themselves in a nationalist light and have changed their name from “The Sunni Congress” to “The Iraqi Congress.” Sunni parties that will probably run independent lists include Tariq Al Hashimi's Iraqi Islamic Party (the only Sunni group that participated in the political process last January, although it withdrew before elections), Adnan Al Dulaymi's Iraqi Congress Party, and Sheikh Khaf Al Alyan's Iraqi National Dialogue Council.

If the Sunni bloc participates in the upcoming elections, it will be challenged by groups who refuse to participate in politics while Iraq is under U.S. occupation and shun anyone who does, particularly in areas such as Al Ramadi, Haditha, Al Qaim, Samra, and Mosul. Thus the participation of a Sunni bloc would be unlikely to end the violence.

Still, Sunnis' decision whether or not to take part in elections is critical in a political sense. If they choose not to participate, they will be unrepresented in parliament for the next four years and the political situation will return to square one. On the other hand, if Sunnis participate and win a significant number of seats, implementing the principle of national consensus in the parliament would be difficult.

The upcoming elections will also witness a change in the electoral system from a single-district to multiple-district system. The main political coalitions, therefore, are now seeking to incorporate members of minority groups such as the Arab Turkmen, Christians, Assyrians, and Yazidis in order to satisfy the need for sectarian, ethnic, and regional diversity imposed by the new electoral system.

The emergence of a new, relatively balanced political configuration after the December elections could allow the development of clearer policies by the Iraqi state, eroded by continuous political changes and security disruptions since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Establishing a modern state with real democratic institutions is still a distant goal, however, because most political coalitions are motivated by the desire to assert sectarian and ethnic identities rather than by a spirit of nationhood and democracy.

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