

Opinion - Political Challenges Ahead for the New Iraqi Prime Minister

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Iraq has been going through a political turmoil since last year. The ongoing series of protests and demonstrations that started as a part of the October Revolution in 2019 demanded accountability, free and fair elections and corruption-free governance in Iraq. The protesters also demanded an end to the Iranian intervention in the domestic affairs of Iraq. Despite widespread protests, no substantive progress has been made for bringing reforms or changing the state of politics in Iraq. In the last four months, Iraq's political deadlock has impeded the government formation process twice. In December 2019, amid mass public protests the then Prime Minister of Iraq, Adil Abdul Mahdi resigned becoming the first Prime Minister to do so ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Three months later in March 2020, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi failed to form a government before the constitutional deadline. President Barham Salih then appealed to all the political parties to come up with a candidate with consensus which again failed. Iraq's political dysfunction has become critical as the country faces multiple internal and external challenges and the protracted effects of these challenges will have a dangerous consequence if no progress is being made.

The recent appointment of Adnan al-Zurfi as the Prime Minister by President Barham Salih sets out new challenges in Iraqi politics as Al-Zurfi is seen to be close to the US and faces rejection by most of the strong political blocs in the Iraqi Parliament. Al-Zurfi will face strong opposition and serious political challenges ahead to bring stability to the country. Iraq has been a country hard to govern and at the moment with crippling threat of Covid-19 pandemic, frequent attacks on US troops in Iraq and the unprecedented decline in oil prices bringing stability seems more challenging than ever. In the post-2003 power-sharing system, Shiite political blocs have maintained the right to name the Prime Minister as the President would be chosen from the Kurds and the speaker from the Sunnis. The most important challenge for Al-Zurfi would be to garner support from major political blocs in the parliament and form a cabinet within 30 days. The powerful Shiite political blocs have already expressed their disapproval and opposition to the new Prime Minister-designate and without the support of these blocs, the way ahead to form a cabinet would be nearly impossible for Al-Zurfi. The Sairoun coalition headed by Muqtada al Sadr is one of the biggest political blocs in the Iraqi parliament. Al-Zurfi had a strong role in fighting Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army when it carried out attacks against the US in 2004. Al-Zurfi was appointed as the governor of Najaf by the then head of the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer after the US invasion of Iraq and hence is seen as a friend of the US. Al-Zurfi has also been accused of being involved in the burning of Iranian Consulate in Najaf amid the widespread protests. The Sairoun coalition has opposed Al-Zurfi's nomination now although it is to be observed if they could come to a deal over the course of Al-Zurfi's political negotiations.

The leading Shiite blocs of Iran-backed al-Fateh alliance pointed out al-Zurfi's close association with the United States and his dual-nationality as points of contention. The Fateh alliance is a political arm of the Al-Hashd ash-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Force) which is an umbrella organisation of various Shia militias including those backed by Iran. These militia groups have been blamed for attacks on international soldiers in Iraq in the recent past. Coming in terms with the Fateh alliance would be challenging as they show very little interest in negotiating with Al-Zurfi. They also have a significant majority in the Parliament and would remain highly skeptical about the new Prime Minister-designate as he enjoys support and backing from the US administration. Both the alliance blocs have strong links to Iran and hence the challenge in front of Al-Zurfi can also be seen as a litmus test for Iraqi politics as to how much can it be stabilized without Iranian support. Ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein Iran has strengthened its influence in Iraq and has remained a key determiner of Iraqi political alliances.

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It is clear from the experience of Al-Zurfi's predecessor that he will have to make compromises and negotiate tactically to gain the support of these political blocs to pass his cabinet in the parliament. The task becomes difficult as all the political blocs are keen on securing their own interests through the power-sharing agreement with other parties. The Kurdish and Sunni factions support the nomination of Al-Zurfi although Al-Zurfi will have to make arrangements for the political demands of these factions to affirm the legitimacy of the government.

Al-Zurfi also faces a strong challenge from the protesters as they have frequently implied their disapproval to any politician associated with the previous political processes to be designated as the Prime Minister. The protesters also are doubtful about sustaining the protest as they face severe difficulties in carrying out demonstrations as many cities in Iraq have been shut amid the fear of the recent Coronavirus pandemic. Al-Zurfi will also have to address the demands of the protesters on the street whose concerns have been not met so far. Protestors although have waned off in several cities, are still carrying out demonstrations calling the corrupt government a greater virus to be fought which further makes the issue complicated especially after various human rights activists have demanded the suspension of the protests amid the Coronavirus outbreak.

The future trajectory of Iraqi politics will be decided by Al-Zurfi's negotiations with the Shiite blocs in the Iraqi parliament. The most difficult challenge for Al-Zurfi would be to balance his relations with the US while gaining the trust and striking a political settlement with these Shiite blocs. A succession of governments that have come to power has not been able to keep the economy afloat. The political impasse in Iraq has impeded the approval of the 2020 budget and has severely affected the Iraqi economy especially after collateral damage faced by Iraq due to the oil war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Hence, even if al-Zurfi manages to win the support of the Parliament and form a cabinet within a month if the new government fails to provide solutions for the immediate challenges there remains a chance that the political deadlock will continue pushing the country towards greater economic risks.

The internal challenges in Iraq have its effects spread across the region. Any new government in the country will also have to make crucial decisions concerning Iraq's engagement with other regional powers in the Middle East. At this point in time, Riyadh would be able to make substantive developments in engaging with Iraq as there remains widespread dissatisfaction against Iran in Iraq. The geopolitical challenges faced by Iran amid an economic meltdown could decrease Iranian aggression in the region. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed Bin Salman has been keen on accentuating Riyadh's engagement with Baghdad and has made efforts in the past to widen the economic partnerships between both countries to counter Iranian influence in Iraq. Iraq's new government, if successful, will have a key role in shaping the country's future and determining Baghdad's regional partnerships at the backdrop of increased distrust and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Hence, any major change in Iraqi politics can also invariably affect the regional dynamics in the Middle East determining the political and economic stability of the region.

All views expressed here are of the author and do not reflect the opinion of either Manipal Academy of Higher Education or The Department of Geopolitics and International Relations , MAHE.

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