ELECTION PROCESS IN IRAQ AND POSITION OF SHIITE GROUPS

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Iraq has entered a new period upon the elimination of ISIS in military terms in the territory of the country. It is possible to say that a new political process began in Iraq when Iraqi central government took control of the disputed territories around Kirkuk and its vicinity upon the operations it carried out following the independence referendum of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) especially in the post-ISIS period. Having entered the election period in such an environment, Iraq focused on the elections planned to be held on 12 May 2018. In the meanwhile, it was announced that the local elections (provincial councils' elections) which were supposed to be held in 2017 were postponed to 22 December 2018 upon the decision of Iraqi Council of Ministers although it had been previously declared that they would be held together with the general elections in Iraq.

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While Iraqi Independent High Election Commission (IHEC) registered 204 parties that will participate in the elections in the pre-election process, 27 different coalitions including 143 out of 204 parties will compete to come to power. The long-lasting discussions concerning the qualifications of candidate deputies have become one of the most important issues in the pre-election political landscape and the condition of having at least a bachelor degree has been stipulated for candidates. This has sparked debates in the Iraqi Parliament and 20% of the candidates' list has been exempt from the condition of bachelor degree upon a draft law prepared by a group of deputies. Whereas this law was enacted with the voting of Iraqi parliament on 11 February 2018, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq was expected to reach a verdict due to objections to the law. The Federal Supreme Court held on 14 February 2018 that the law was applicable. The current number of seats in the Iraqi Parliament increased to 329 after one seat was also given to Feyli (Shiite) Kurds. Therefore, the quota allocated for the minorities in Iraq is now 9 seats. Christians, Yezidis,

Shabaks and Feyli Kurds who have seat quota in Iraq will vote for their candidates. It is said that more than 7 thousand deputies will participate in the elections planned to be held on 12 May. Although this situation is similar to that in the previous elections, these elections will be held in a very different environment, which makes 12 May elections more important and different than ever. They are already a milestone of themselves since they are the first elections, which will be held after the end of ISIS control in Iraq. Furthermore, the developments following the referendum in Iraq that has reached a state of division upon the KRG independence referendum have differentiated the relations between Erbil and Baghdad. A new political fight will start notably in Kirkuk, Mosul, Salahaddin and in certain part of Diyala which are called disputed territories as of 2003 in Baghdad.

However, the gap between the public and political platform grows gradually. It is said that the public has less confidence in politicians and thus, they are doubtful about going to the ballot box. The division and separations among the political groups have led the public to incline away from the politics. As a matter of fact, these politicians are also seen to be aware of this lack of confidence. A major part of political groups make efforts to do politics by making use of new initiatives and persons. That is why many political groups will show new figures as candidate deputies.

On the other hand, it is conspicuously seen that Iraq has significantly changed its discourse. It seems that a more nationalist, innovative and liberal discourse has been adopted by mostly focusing on the notion of country in Iraq where a political discourse away from sectarianism has been rising. More importantly, this alienation from sectarianism does not only remain on the level of discourse but it also comes true among the public. Many people with whom we have interviewed have indicated that Shiite and Sunni people understand each other better now.

It is even stated that the Shiite and the Sunni could not pass to the neighbors of each other before in the provinces with large and mixed societies like Baghdad but that almost no problem is faced now. This détente also makes itself felt in the social life. Despite occasional terrorist attacks, it would not be wrong to say that the public is happy and prospectively hopeful due to the elimination of ISIS in military terms. It is seen that social life has significantly revived especially in Baghdad, the capital which is said to be among the provinces of Iraq that face danger the most. The opening of worldwide shops one by one at the newly-opened shopping centers is perceived to sign that life has started to return to normal in Iraq. Increasing attention to new Western-style restaurants and cafes accompanying these shopping centers and even open air concerts held as opening events almost every day are the signals of a beginning of a different social life. However, it would not be wrong to say that such differentiation also embodies certain dangers. Such that the pace of the change has reached a dimension that might push the public to social instability and has even had an almost extreme nature for Iraqi people. Having regard to the close and conservative structure of Iraq which

bears the traces of modernity in its past after 1991 and 2003 as well as the rise of radical Islamic movements in the country, it should not be neglected that the mentioned rapid socialization might turn into a possibility of a new conflict for Iraqi society. To put it more clearly, it is possible that the dimension of the socialization might grow in Iraq and innovative and liberal views and radical Islamic movements might come face to face in case of the failure in adopting such socialization. Therefore, it should not be neglected that the list prepared by some Shiite militia such as Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq known as Islamic radicalists to run for elections brings about the possibility to increase the public inclination towards religious discourse in the following process and that the mentioned groups may lean further towards radicalization due to the opposing position of the public.

As indicated above, one of the most discussed issues in the political process is also the separation among the Shiite that is the major political actor in Iraq which approaches the elections in a complicated and highly-charged environment. Another main debate topic is what kind of effects will be seen on the election results and the future of Dawa Party that has always determined Iraqi Prime Minister except for Ayad Alawi term when this party does not run for elections under its own name. Two powerful wings in the Dawa Party (Nouri al-Maliki – State of Law Coalition and Haider al-Abadi – al-Nasr Coalition) will run for elections with separate lists. On the other hand, Ammar al-Hakim who has left the leading position of Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) which is one of the oldest Shiite parties in Iraq and who runs for elections by founding the National Wisdom Movement has indeed taken a political risk. Undertaking restructuring works, Ammar al-Hakim has especially focused on the youth and has even established a National Youth Council. As one of the significant figures of the Shiite political movement, Muqtada al-Sadr takes part in

the elections with a fully independent list. An interesting detail is that Iraqi Communist Party is also included in Sairun list set by Muqtada al-Sadr. However, maybe the most important development that makes these elections different is that some of the militia in al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which is the major actor in the fight against ISIS and has become a real phenomenon, will run for elections with a separate list. While the role played by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which was formed upon a fatwa of the Shiite religious authority in Iraq, in the fight against ISIS with Iran's support has moved mountains in Iraq, it is an issue of concern whether this influence will turn into a political impact and how much it will affect the politics.

Both political groups and the public in Iraq draws attention to the importance of the division among the Shiite. It is seen that the Shiite groups have acted together in the formation of the government as of the 2005 elections upon this division and a structure called National Alliance has

also collapsed and it is expected that a new Shiite structure will emerge following the elections. Furthermore, Dawa Party which has played a role determining the Prime Minister in Iraq since 2005 has also decided not to take part in the elections. However, the transitional situation in forming the pre-election coalitions also attracts attention. Especially the mobility on al-Nasr List formed by Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi has become the most discussed issue in the pre-election period. The first joining of al-Nasr List with Fatah List led by Hadi al-Amiri and then the following participation of Wisdom Movement led by Ammar al-Hakim has turned al-Nasr List into a very big coalition but both groups have separated from al-Nasr List later. Therefore, 5 influential lists have been formed, the majority of which includes the Shiite population in the elections. In this sense, it is possible to say that the competition will be among the most important 5 comprehensive lists for the Shiite in the elections and in the formation

of the government. These 5 lists are as follows:

1.   Al-Nasr List – Led by Haider al-Abadi

2.   Fatah List – Led by Hadi El-Amiri

3.   State of Law Coalition – Led by Nouri al-Maliki

4.   Wisdom List – Led by Ammar al-Hakim

5.   Sairun List – Led by Muqtada al-Sadr

It is spoken out loudly that the competition in the elections will be between al-Nasr List formed by the present Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Fatah List representing the political wing of the Shiite militia in al-Hashd al-Shaabi. On the other hand, it is foreseen that there is a balance among the other three lists and the number of deputies that they will have will be close to each other.

At this point, it would be appropriate to carry out a detailed examination concerning the lists.

Al-Nasr List: After the oppositions against the position of Nouri al-Maliki who acted as the Secretary General of Dawa Party after the 2014 elections and has served as prime minister for two terms, the already existing and deepening segregation in Dawa Party, which is the oldest, most organized and largest party in Iraq, upon the election of Haider al-Abadi as prime minister has led this party to decide not to run for elections in 2018. As a consequence of this decision, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has formed al-Nasr list including almost 30 parties and structurings. It would not be wrong to say that this table gives place to two wings within Dawa Party supported by Iran and the USA and Haider al-Abadi takes part in the USA wing.

Furthermore, it is also seen that Haider al-Abadi has an advantageous position in the division within the party. It is known that 24 out of 30 current deputies who are members of Dawa Party in the Iraqi Parliament act together with Haider al-Abadi. It would not be wrong to say that this situation provides advantages to al-Abadi. On

the other hand, the role of al-Abadi in the success in fighting ISIS and his image as a leader who defeats the Kurds, his contribution to Iraq's economic survival despite all the problems in the country, his efforts in maintaining multilateralism in foreign policy, his advantaged traits such as his relations with certain authorities provide him with the public support. It is seen that al-Abadi has very high self-confidence by being aware of these advantages since al-Abadi seems not to make concessions concerning the lists and alliances. It has been announced that the Fatah and al-Nasr Lists have been joined after the formation of coalitions but this has not lasted longer than 48

hours. It is said that only the list leader al-Abadi has wished to compromise with Hadi al-Amiri for joining Fatah and al-Nasr Lists but has not recognized the right to speak of the other leaders on Fatah List. It is said that even the Wisdom Movement led by Ammar al-Hakim has decided alone to be involved in al-Nasr List despite the objections in Fatah List and thus Fatah List has separated from al-Nasr List.

At this point, it is indicated that the internal conflicts in the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq constitute problems concerning the presence of Ammar al-Hakim in al-Nasr List. Leader of Fatah List including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI) Hadi al-Amiri

left SCIRI since he became the leader of Badr Organization which is the military wing of SCIRI previously led by Ammar al-Hakim and he went on to form another structuring. He also ran for elections with the State of Law Coalition formed under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki in the 2014 elections and gained 22 seats. It is stated that Hadi al-Amiri did not recognize the leadership of Ammar al-Hakim, son of the SCIRI leader Ayatollah Abdulaziz al-Hakim, who succeeded the latter after his death on the ground that Ammar al-Hakim was young, inexperienced and had a mentality which was different from the foundational principles and Fundamentals of SCIRI and therefore he quit. As a matter of fact, it is known that Ammar al-Hakim had difference of opinions with the prominent figures such as Humam Hamoudi, Baqir Jabr Solagh, and Jalal al-Din Ali al-Sagheer after he took up the leadership of SCIRI. Therefore, Ammar al-Hakim surprisingly declared that he quit SCIRI before the 2018 elections and that he founded National Wisdom Movement in July 2017. That is why Ammar al-Hakim was not accepted by Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of Fatah List allying with al-Nasr List and by the senior officials of SCIRI. Since Haider al-Abadi did not take a step back, Fatah List separated from al-Nasr List. The Wisdom Movement led by Ammar al-Hakim declared that it withdrew from the list 14 days after Fatah List separated from al-Nasr List.

Al-Nasr List also gives place to powerful structures such as Islamic Virtue Party, one of the Shiite parties that has deep roots and is influential in the provinces especially like Basra, Amara in Iraq, the Ataa Movement founded by the Head of National Security Council Falah al-Fayyadh, the National Reform Movement led by former Iraqi Prime Minister and current Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the Al-Moustakilloun (Independents) structuring including figures such as Hussain al-Shahristani, Khalid al-Atiyya, Salih al-Hasnawi who have undertaken important positions in the Internal Organization of Dawa Party

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and in the post-2003 politics and government. Although these structures do not seem to be the main actors in the Iraqi politics, they strengthen al-Nasr List since they are influential in the conduct of the politics in Iraq. Moreover, Haider al-Abadi's position as Prime Minister will also allow him to use the state power in line with the interests of al-Nasr List. Taking into consideration that Head of National Security Council Falah al-Fayyadh, with whom especially al-Hashd al-Shaabi is administratively affiliated as well as police forces and army, also takes part in the elections together with al-Abadi, the latter might win the security structure over in the country. This brings about a potential electorate and the activities of other lists might be taken under control, illegal activities might be prevented or be used in favor of al-Nasr List.

On the other hand, it is indicated that al-Abadi wants to put emphasis on the Iraqi identity in accordance with the present political trend in Iraq, to have a secular and national stance, to prioritize innovative understanding and to be supported by the Sunni in order to show that he approaches all ethnic, religious and sectarian groups equally and he also tries to strengthen the technocrat mentality by addressing the well-educated strata of the society. Therefore, it is said that certain steps will be taken before the elections to reconstruct the regions damaged by ISIS and even the timing of Iraq Donor Conference held in Kuwait will be used. Furthermore, it is known that al-Abadi wants to draw public attention with certain figures that have poor commitment to political ideology but are talented and new instead of besmirched politicians. In this sense, al-Abadi is said to receive the support of the Shiite religious authority.

Nevertheless, the biggest criticism of al-Nasr List is the high number of parties in the list. The involvement of a large number of newly founded small scale parties and structures in al-Nasr List as well as aforementioned major parties also leads to a chaos concerning the candidature in al-Nasr

List. Furthermore, it is said that al-Abadi has taken risks by resorting to a political structuring with new parties and that Iraqi society will act conservatively while voting and will vote for persons and groups that voters know even though they are tired of the current politics and politicians. It is also indicated that al-Abadi will have difficulties in consolidating the power of his list for this reason. On the other hand, it is told that al-Abadi could not take care of the internal management and functioning of the state since he mostly spent his time in the fight against ISIS and survival of the government under his four-year term as Prime Minister and thus, he could not wipe out the elements infiltrated by Nouri al-Maliki in the state under his two terms as Prime Minister (8 years). It is possible to state that this might be an obstacle before al-Nasr List and that Nouri al-Maliki might use this power to support Fatah List shown as the biggest rival of al-Nasr List or to capitalize on Fatah List even if he does not use this power for himself.

Fatah List: It would be appropriate to say that Fatah List is the list which has the highest potential to receive votes after al-Nasr List. Fatah List was formed under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri, leader of Badr Organization. Fatah list including almost 20 structures encompasses structurings known as the political wing of Shiite militia. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that other groups outside Badr Organization have a political weight in Iraq. SCIRI which is one of the most rooted parties in Iraq but has lost influence in the field in time and shank when Ammar al-Hakim resigned from the leading position and established another structure (National Wisdom Movement) also runs for elections with Fatah Lists. It is seen that the mentioned list wants to reflect military influence on the political field by profiting from the popularity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. However, notably al-Nasr List and many other groups are disturbed by the view considering Fatah List as the list of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and it is said to be a supra-party

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structure and even constitute a part of state institutions.

On the other hand, it is possible to say that Fatah List tries to fill the gap in the conservative grassroots emerging among the Shiite upon the division of powerful Shiite parties such as Dawa Party, SCIRI. Indeed, it is seen that Fatah List develops a political attitude through the Shiite Islamic and conservative strata that has large grassroots in Iraq. The mostly liberal, secular, non-sectarian and innovative statements used in the discourse of the structures other than Fatah List lead to a gap concerning the Islamist and conservative voters who still have a significant weight in Iraq. Therefore, it is seen that Fatah List gives weight to Islamist and conservative discourse and tries to fill the gap of other groups differently from other parties.

It is possible to say that the Shiite militia in Fatah List have a significant potential of taking votes in Diyala, Baghdad, Basra and Nasiriyah where the list has control and influence. Despite this, the public doubts that the involvement of armed groups in the politics might trigger the conflicts and thus, it is doubted that the support to al-Hashd al-Shaabi might be subject to political reactions. In this regard, it is seen that the government and more importantly, Shiite authority no longer needs Shiite militia, armed groups should hand their arms to the government and they should be independent from the politics.

State of Law Coalition: It is clearly seen that State of Law Coalition which took part in the elections as an election ally once again under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki who won the 2014 elections with a difference of more than 60 seats from the closest rival and with 730 votes alone has no longer the power that it used to have. As a matter of fact, Dawa Party taking part in the State of Law Coalition in the 2014 elections will not run for elections and a large majority of Dawa Party members will act together with al-Nasr List formed by Haider al-Abadi, which is one of the biggest losses of Nouri al-Maliki. On the

other hand, another loss of State of Law Coalition is the Badr Organization that ran for the 2014 elections inside the State of Law Coalition and won 22 seats. As indicated above, the formation of Fatah List under the leadership of Badr Organization Leader Hadi al-Amiri and the involvement of groups previously supporting Nouri al-Maliki in Fatah List brings down the potential of State of Law Coalition to take votes. Therefore, it is spoken that Nouri al-Maliki makes great efforts to form alliance with Fatah List but such alliance cannot be sealed since Hadi al-Amiri does not accept the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki. It is known that Hadi al-Amiri does not want al-Maliki to make use of the popularity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi which has considerably gained sympathy among the people. On the other hand, it is said that Hadi al-Amiri also tries to stay away from the "notoriety" of al-Maliki. Indeed, there is an established belief among all strata of the Iraqi society that Maliki's practices have caused the emergence of ISIS. Therefore, al-Maliki has lost so much support because of ISIS. It seems difficult for Nouri al-Maliki to gain his previous power and it is unlikely for him to become Prime Minister again both due to the objections of the USA even though he maintains his political presence and to the lost public support. However, Nouri al-Maliki might support Hadi al-Amiri if the latter receives a large number of votes and has seats which will allow him to be elected at Prime Minister level. In such a scenario, it is thought that Nouri al-Maliki will even force Hadi al-Amiri to found a majority government in order to be influential in the government.

National Wisdom List: As previously indicated, National Wisdom Movement was founded by Ammar al-Hakim who resorted to a new structuring by laying down the SCIRI leadership. It is seen that Ammar al-Hakim will follow an election strategy mostly through a youth and women's movement. He even declared the foundation of National Youth Council on 3 February 2018 by making

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large investments to this end. It is known that the biggest reason for Ammar al-Hakim's resignation from SCIRI is the conflict of generations, the powerful figures in SCIRI had difficulties in accepting Ammar al-Hakim's leadership and Ammar al-Hakim and former SCIRI members had disagreements. It is said that Ammar al-Hakim wanted to renew the party by making changes in SCIRI and replace its members but powerful figures such as Humam Hamoudi, Baqir Jabr Solagh, Jalal al-Din Ali al-Sagheer objected to these changes. It is known that the internal problems of SCIRI has recently reached an irresolvable point and Ammar al-Hakim has decided to form a new structuring due to the objections of traditionalists. It would be appropriate to say that Ammar al-Hakim has formed a new structure for the purpose of freeing himself from the failure and even corruption claims among the skeleton crew of SCIRI. Therefore, it should be taken into consideration that the elections might show the failure of the former members and lead them to quit

the party themselves and thus, Ammar al-Hakim might try to take control of SCIRI again.

Sairun List: This list formed by Muqtada al-Sadr is the most clearly predictable list concerning the election results. It is absolutely believed that Muqtada al-Sadr who has deepened grassroots concerning the potential to take votes in the post-2003 period will be the leader. Muqtada al-Sadr who supported governmental reforms even made his partisans take to the streets immediately and also withdrew them immediately, which can be seen as an example. Therefore, it is said that Muqtada al-Sadr will reach a potential to take votes similarly to the previous elections. Muqtada al-Sadr has significant advantages in the potential of leading his grassroots. Furthermore, it is said that Muqtada al-Sadr will run for elections with completely new figures and will make a list especially among the people who object to corruption. On the other hand, it is remarkable that Muqtada al-Sadr has established alliance

with Iraqi Communist Party and Iraqi Republican Party led by Sunni Arab Saad Asim al-Janabi which has an Arab nationalist discourse. Having regard to the influence of the mentioned groups in the field, it is seen that Muqtada al-Sadr does not aim at winning with this alliance but tries to give a message indicating that he adopts a secular and central approach away from sectarianism. It is possible to say that Muqtada al-Sadr will not force to be in the government in the post-election process and he will play an opposing and balancing role outside the government if necessary.

Expectations of the Shiite Groups Regarding the Elections

As is seen, a new balance has been built among the Shiite that is the main actor of the politics in Iraq. It would be appropriate to say that different political dynamics will emerge in this balance. The differentiating Shiite political balance in Iraq will determine the features of the government which will be formed in Iraq. According to the current

political balance, the largest list is said to win 40-45 seats at most. It is thought that it is not certain which Shiite party will win 20-25 seats due to the separations among these parties and that the election results will be determined by undecided voters. It is also uncertain what kind of attitude the public will adopt since there is a large number of parties that have been newly established. Indeed, the unwillingness of the people in voting is understood from the number of voters who have taken their electronic voter cards. Only 11 million voters have been able to obtain their cards in Iraq where there are almost 24 million voters. The grassroots that newly founded political parties will have and the election campaigns they will carry out also remain uncertain.

At this point, especially the participation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the politics has significant dimensions. Even though there is considerable affinity to al-Hashd al-Shaabi among the Shiite population, it would be appropriate to say that people are concerned about the

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involvement of armed groups in the political process. It is feared that the mentioned groups might trigger the conflict dynamics in Iraq. However, the large majority of the political groups and even Shiite religious authorities as well as the Iraqi government oppose the involvement of armed groups in the politics. Therefore, it is foreseen that these groups will act in a controlled manner and will try not to draw reactions. Nevertheless, it is feared that the mentioned groups might cause rising tensions and a conflict environment if they are excluded especially from the government forming process in the post-election period or cannot take what they want in the bargains with the government.

It would be appropriate to say that Nouri al-Maliki and Ammar al-Hakim have lost grassroots and will face a 20-25% loss. This electorate is anticipated to support al-Nasr and Fatah Lists.

While Iran and the USA are expected maintain their influence in the formation of the new government, it is stated that

Hadi al-Amiri does not want Haider al-Abadi to be elected as Prime Minister once again. On the other hand, differently from the previous governments, it is further spoken out loudly that it is possible to form a majority government including certain groups but not a government which gives place to all political groups that are entitled to enter the parliament and which is called "national unity government". This will be a significant difference for Iraq since all of the previous governments have been national unity governments including all groups represented in the parliament and have not really acted as opposition in the parliament. All the strata that are not pleased with their positions have started expressing their opposing views in the government and thus, the government has become functionless. Therefore, serious crisis and instability has been witnessed in the government. The stability which may be ensured by a majority government might be an opportunity to move Iraq to a better phase. In this regard, the integration of Sunni groups into the political

process, the smooth course of Erbil-Baghdad relations, the balanced relations to be established by providing rights and interests to Turkmens and minority groups will be the key for the Iraqi government.

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