

More than 30 killed as rival Shia groups struggle for power in Baghdad

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In the worst violence seen in Baghdad for years, at least 30 people have been killed and 380 injured in two days of violent clashes after supporters of Muqtadr al-Sadr, the Shia populist cleric, stormed government buildings and clashed with security forces and militia groups belonging to his Shia rivals in the Coordination Framework.

The violence erupted after al-Sadr announced his “final retirement” from politics. Hundreds of his supporters in his Sairoon movement took to the streets and broke through the concrete barriers of the heavily fortified Green Zone, where Iraq’s federal parliament and government buildings, as well as the US and other foreign embassies, are located.

Protests also broke out in Iraq’s southern provinces, where al-Sadr’s supporters burned tires and blocked roads in the oil-rich province of Basra, and hundreds demonstrated outside the governorate building in Missan.

The caretaker government of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew, while Iran, which has sought to bring Iraq’s Shiite factions closer together, closed its borders with Iraq, as millions of Iranians prepared to visit Iraq for an annual pilgrimage to Shia sites.

On Monday night, al-Sadr said he was going on hunger strike until the violence and the use of weapons stopped. The next day, in a bid to disassociate himself from the violence, he apologised and called on his followers to leave the Green Zone and the camps where they have been protesting for the last four weeks, prompting many of his supporters to leave.

Al-Sadr’s retirement threat—the fourth this erratic and unprincipled politician has made over the last eight years—and the violence he knew it would unleash are bound up with his determination to take direct control of Iraq’s sectarian-ethnic political system at the expense of his Shia rivals in the Coordination Framework.

While al-Sadr, who comes from a leading Shia clerical family, led the main Shia resistance to the US occupation, he has no progressive answers to the enormous social problems confronting the Iraqi people. Posing as a nationalist opposed to foreign interference in Iraq, he has links to both Washington and Tehran. He has acted as kingmaker in

forging ruling coalitions and placed his own supporters in key positions in the cabinet, the state-owned oil company, powerful ministries and local authorities. They take a cut of government contracts to pass on to his organisation, which runs a militia and provides jobs and social welfare for his impoverished supporters in Baghdad’s slums.

Al-Sadr’s announcement of his “final retirement” followed the resignation of the 83-year-old Grand Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, a close associate of al-Sadr’s father and spiritual leader of the Sadrists, who challenged his right to act as the heir of his father, Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, saying, “You cannot lead by their names. In reality you are not a Sadrist even if you are from the family of Sadrists.” Haeri called on his followers to transfer their allegiance to Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and “obey” Iran’s supreme leader as “the most worthy and competent [individual] to lead the [Muslim] nation.”

Al-Sadr’s Shia rivals—organised in the Coordination Framework under former premier Nuri al-Maliki’s party, the State of Law Coalition, and the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance, the political arm of the Shia-led former paramilitary group Hashed al-Shaabi—are equally corrupt and are widely despised.

The worsening political crisis in Washington’s puppet state, which is at the centre of regional and international political conflicts, threatens outright civil war between the rival Shia parties and their militias, and the breakup of the state, as Iraq’s venal politicians fight for control of the country’s oil wealth and the spoils of political office following last October’s elections.

It comes amid an ongoing political deadlock, with no new government in place more than 10 months after the elections. Al-Sadr’s Sairoon movement won the most votes in a dismal 41 percent voter turnout.

The elections came amid mounting hostility towards the entire political regime set up by Washington after its criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. With no settlement between the country’s rival puppet masters in Washington and Tehran, Iraq’s political factions have been

unable to agree on a new government.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a former intelligence officer with no political base, assumed the premiership with Washington's support in May 2020 after the month-long mass social protests of October 2019. Those protests demanded jobs and an end to poverty, corruption and the entire ethno-sectarian political system, and led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi.

Mahdi's government had sought to suppress the protests with lethal force, deploying the security forces and paramilitary groups to shoot down more than 600 protesters, further inflaming tensions until the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions emptied the streets.

Al-Kadhimi not only continued the economic and social policies of his predecessor, but also implemented new measures aimed at securing loans from the International Monetary Fund that have devastated workers' incomes. He continued the repression of oppositionists and reneged on his pledges to investigate the killings by the security forces and to introduce legislation that would overturn Iraq's sectarian political system, key demands of the protest movement.

With Iraq's political factions set against any changes that would limit their privileges, patronage and wealth, al-Kadhimi has been unable to set a budget for 2022, despite the increase in oil prices, that could help alleviate the crushing social and economic conditions engulfing the vast majority of the Iraqi people.

Al-Sadr announced his intention of forming a government with the largest Sunni and Kurdish blocs, leaving the Iran-aligned Shia parties in opposition, in a break with the practice of including all the political parties in government. Refusing to be excluded from the patronage system, his Shia opponents in the Coordination Framework blocked his coalition-building process via a series of procedural and legal interventions, including using the Federal Supreme Court to block the nomination of a president and launching missile attacks on his Kurdish allies.

In June, al-Sadr withdrew his entire bloc from parliament, in a move aimed at forcing his rivals to agree to a new government and opening the door to street protests, counter-demonstrations and instability to force the dissolution of parliament and new elections. When the Coordination Framework, now the majority party in parliament, nominated Mohammed al-Sudani for the premiership, al-Sadr's supporters stormed the parliament to prevent it selecting a president from the Kurdish parties, the first move in the process of nominating a premier, and have refused to move until their demands are met.

While the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), ruled by the corrupt Barzani family, had originally backed al-Sadr's bloc, with the Iraqi Federal

Supreme Court's February ruling that the KRG was not entitled to keep its oil and gas revenues, largely derived from sales to Turkey, the KRG began to push for a new constitutional arrangement that would cede more power to the Kurds and other ethnic constituencies, rupturing relations with al-Sadr.

Since the resignation of al-Sadr's Sairoon bloc from parliament, al-Sadr has called for early elections, the dissolution of parliament and constitutional reforms. His supporters protested outside the Supreme Judicial Council in the Green Zone when it refused to order the dissolution of parliament, saying it had no authority to do so. Al-Sadr has refused to participate in Kadhimi's efforts to set up a national dialogue of all Iraq's political parties, the first session of which was held two weeks ago. While most of the political parties have agreed to hold early elections, they differ about the arrangements for holding them and who is to organize them.

It is clear that whatever the composition of a new government, if and when it is formed, it will only heap more hardship and suffering on top of the chronic shortages of electricity and water and the soaring cost of food and other essentials that have already created widespread hardship.

The lessons of the failed Egyptian Revolution are of enormous importance to the Iraqi working class. A mass movement of the working class brought down the hated military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

However, because the mass movement was dominated by bourgeois opposition parties and sections of the affluent middle class, all of whom were bitterly opposed to any challenge to capitalist rule, the military, backed by US imperialism and its Gulf allies, seized the opportunity for a brutal crackdown, instituting a reign of terror under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Mubarak's former general and deposed President Mohammed Morsi's minister of defence.

The Iraqi working class must not allow itself to be dominated by Iraq's political cliques and clerics, but instead must seize the political initiative. It must tear itself away from all the political parties of the Iraqi bourgeoisie and build a party entirely independent of the capitalist class, based upon an internationalist revolutionary programme to establish workers' power, abolish capitalism and fight for a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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