

MP-IDSA Monday Morning Webinar

On

“Political Trends in Iraq and Challenge for Stability” 11 October 2021

Event Report

Ms Nagapushpa Devendra, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA, spoke on the topic “Political Trends in Iraq and Challenge for Stability” at the Monday Morning Webinar held on 11 October 2021 at 10 am. The webinar was chaired by Dr Muddassir Quamar, Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA. Dr Lakshmi Priya, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA and Dr Jatin Kumar, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA participated as panellists.

Executive Summary

Ms Nagapushpa Devendra analysed the political trends and outcomes in Iraq, especially in light of the parliamentary elections held on 10 October 2021. Following a brief overview of the existing political situation, the speaker highlighted the latest electoral trends and political compositions grounded in the sectarian divisions. Furthermore, she underlined the economic turmoil and its major fallouts on the people which have influenced their political decisions. The presentation also dealt with India–Iraq relations and the areas of potential cooperation. Iraq’s relations with the other regional countries, the challenges that follow and its importance in maintaining regional stability were also analysed.

Detailed Report

Dr Muddassir Quamar in his introductory remarks stated that Iraq has been going through a difficult time since 2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein. It is affected by identity-based politics grounded in sectarianism, religious extremism and ethnic and tribal divisions. In the last few years, it has also faced other difficult challenges, including COVID-19 pandemic, economic mismanagement and political turbulence and demonstrations which have further aggravated the political situation causing instability. Following a brief background along with the mention of the latest parliamentary elections held in Iraq on 10 October 2021, he handed over the floor to the speaker.

Ms Nagapushpa Devendra started her presentation by giving a background of the political situation in Iraq since the defeat of the Islamic State (IS). She said that the first elections were held in 2018, but it was only in 2019 that a new government could be formed under Adel Abdul-Mahdi who was forced to resign in December 2019 after protests broke out against his government. Mustafa Al-Kadhimi became the prime minister in May 2020. She further discussed the 2019 Iraqi protests, namely Tishreen Movement, which stemmed from the disillusionment among Iraqis against the political system and governance failure. Their demands included an end to institutionalised corruption, electoral reforms, a government of technocrats and early elections.

Ms Devendra stated a few reasons for Iraq's early parliamentary elections including the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and price competition among the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) such as Russia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since Iraq's economy is heavily dependent on revenue generated by oil export, it suffered greatly when oil prices were hit as a result of the price competition. All these factors, clubbed with the internal disturbance and the previously persisting economic and political situation pushed Iraqi leadership to hold early elections in 2021, which were originally scheduled for 2022.

Before discussing the election results, Ms Devendra gave an overview of the reformed electoral laws introduced in 2021. The new laws have made it easier for smaller parties and independent candidates to contest the elections, although with certain pre-existing roadblocks.

Ms Devendra discussed the participation of various political blocs such as Shia, Sunni and Kurds in October 2021 elections. According to her, the Sadrist Movement, backed by the prominent Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has a good chance of winning the largest Shiite vote.

With regards to Sunni bloc, the competition is expected to take place between two major political groups, Civil Democratic Forces Alliance, headed by current parliament speaker Mohammed Al Halbousi and Azem Iraq Alliance, headed by businessman Khamis Al-Khanjar. Currently Sunni parties together hold 73 seats in the parliament and their leaders claim that it will reach 80–90 seats after the approval of 83 electoral districts.

With regards to Kurdish bloc, the speaker opined that two political parties, namely, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) may secure a majority of seats in the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan. In her view, the KDP coalition is expected to dominate in the Kurdish provinces of Erbil and Duhok. Apart from the above two parties, the Kurdistan coalition is another major Kurdish group. Ms Devendra said that in this election a great divide was seen among the Kurdish people, as observed by the campaigning methods.

The speaker also mentioned the two newly formed political parties, namely, Harakat al-Waei and Hezbollah Brigades, which contested the parliamentary elections this year. She observed a change in the campaign agenda of the parties, wherein most of the candidates promised to fulfil the domestic needs of the Iraqis such as offering jobs, goods and services and infrastructural projects, to name a few.

The speaker went on to elaborate on the possible outcomes of the election. Firstly, a likely division between the two major Shia parties, namely, Sadrist and Fatah can be foreseen. Secondly, the presidency is likely to go to the PUK as has happened in the previous elections. Thirdly, there may be an end of opposition from smaller parties in Kurdistan, since Patriotic Movement of Kurdistan has joined the largest opposition group namely Gorran Movement to solve its leadership crisis. Lastly, in order to be a part of the next government the Sunni and Kurdish parties will have to come together with the Shia victors.

According to the speaker, regional and international actors want Kadhimi to continue as prime minister since Iraq has witnessed relative stability under his leadership. He initiated domestic reforms to create jobs and improve the living standard of Iraqi people. In addition, he brought together the key regional countries to discuss the developmental issues in the Baghdad Conference, held recently in Iraq.

Ms Devendra discussed the challenges faced by Iraq under two heads namely, domestic and regional. The domestic challenges include the following. First, elections will yield a larger number of smaller blocs in the parliament, which would make government formation and decision-making difficult. Second, it will be a difficult task to deal with corruption and unemployment, undertake major reforms, prevent resurgence of ISIS and keep COVID-19 crisis under control. Third, asserting control over some of the pro-Iranian armed groups will pose another major problem.

While discussing the regional challenges, she underlined that the US' withdrawal of troops will be a major security challenge for the new Iraqi government. On China's engagement with Iraq, the speaker said that China is working to integrate Iraq into its "predatory" Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The economic investments under the same initiative will not stabilise Iraq. According to her, anti-US actors in the country frame Chinese Belt and Road investments as a potential alternative to US economic support. Regarding Russia, the speaker said that its growing ties with the Iranian proxy militias in Iraq could threaten not only Iraqi stability but also US' interests in Iraq and Syria.

Ms Devendra elaborated on the various areas of India and Iraq engagements. India's economic engagements with Iraq range from increased bilateral trade, India becoming a preferred medical help destination for Iraqis to participation of Iraqi pharmaceutical companies in Indian events. Furthermore, India and Iraq share common regional concerns over various countries such as Syria, Turkey and Iran, to name a few. India has also been actively participating in Iraq's political realm by extending support towards any initiative which strengthens Iraq's democratic exercise.

The speaker suggested various potential areas for strengthening India-Iraq relations. In her view, the areas which could be actively explored include developing trade agreement, establishing virtual platforms of outreach, India's use of soft power in Iraq and undertaking capacity building of Iraqi security forces to counter terrorism. This would help ensure stability in Iraq which is of regional interest for West Asia and the global community.

Following Ms Devendra's reflection on Iraqi political scenario and elections, Dr Muddassir Quamar highlighted and summarised the major problems in Iraq such as that of the two-fold challenges faced by the current political leadership. These include the domestic economic and political turmoil and a significant influence of external powers in Iraq along with that of the armed militias within the country. He concluded by thanking Ms Devendra again for her valuable insights into the above-mentioned issues and then invited suggestions and questions from the other panellists namely Dr Jatin Kumar and Dr Lakshmi Priya who underlined the issue of the lower turnout as a result of voter's disgruntlement against the ruling elites and lack of confidence in the political system.

Report prepared by Dr Jatin Kumar, Research Analyst, West Asia Centre, MP-IDS