
PROTEST CALLED OFF AS IRAQ'S PRIME MINISTER PROPOSES CABINET SHUFFLE

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A weekslong antigovernment protest in Baghdad was called off Thursday after Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi proposed replacing almost his entire cabinet, including his finance and foreign ministers.

The move was largely prompted by demands from firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, a fierce opponent of U.S. coalition forces in Iraq who has in recent months shifted his focus to campaigning for domestic reforms.

In response to the prime ministers proposals, Mr. Sadr suspended the antigovernment protests that he had instigated, which began in February and evolved into tent cities set up at entrances to the capitals so-called Green Zone. The heavily secured quarter houses parliament as well as embassies and other international offices.

Mr. Abadi trimmed the size of his cabinet from 22 ministers to 16 and submitted a list of 14 new names for parliamentary approval. He kept only his defense and interior ministers, citing security reasons.

I submit this list...you have the right to accept, adjust or refuse it, Mr. Abadi told lawmakers.

Parliament will vote on the names in 10 days, said Speaker Salim al-Jabouri.

Mr. Sadr said that if parliament didnt approve the list, he would press for a no-confidence vote in Mr. Abadis government.

Mr. Abadis decision amounts to a victory for Mr. Sadr, who rallied his massive populist following among Iraqs Shiite Muslim majority to agitate for anticorruption measures and other changes that were promised almost a year ago.

It also risks empowering one of the strongest opponents of American influence in Iraq just as the U.S. plans to bring in more uniformed military personnel to help fight the Sunni extremist group, Islamic State.

Mr. Sadr came to prominence during the U.S.-led war in Iraq in 2003, filling a political vacuum and drumming up popular support among Iraqis averse to the war. His militia launched a major attack on U.S. and Iraqi forces in Najaf in 2004 that lasted for months.

The Baghdad tent cities began in mid-March, snarling traffic in the capital as crowds following his call erected orderly rows of tents and medical-aid and food stations.

The size of the crowds, and perceived threat to Green Zone security led the government to pull some of the Iraqi armed forces, including special forces, back from the front lines fighting Islamic State.

Last weekend Mr. Sadr appeared himself at the protests from his base in Najaf. Some soldiers ostensibly on security detail rushed to take selfies with him cleric, illustrating his continued popularity. After he decamped, videos posted to Facebook showed soldiers scrambling to grab anything he left behind as a souvenir.

Protesters began breaking down tents and cleaning up on Thursday, while others held victory celebrations.

Mr. Sadr had lobbied for a technocratic new slate of ministers instead of overtly grabbing for power, a move designed to boost his image as a magnanimous leader, said Khadhum al-Moqdadi, professor of media and international studies at Baghdad University.

Included on the list of potential ministers was Ali Allawi, a member of the transitional Iraqi government following the ouster of dictator Saddam Hussein, and Sharif Ali bin al-Hussein, who advocated Mr. Husseins overthrow and claims to be heir to the last Iraqi king, Faisal II.

Mr. Sadr previously released a list of 90 names he said would make acceptable cabinet ministers. He didnt comment in whether he approved of Mr. Abadis choices.

The confrontation between Messrs Sadr and Abadi has been seen as a showdown between Iraqs wealthy political class and the masses, with Mr. Sadr leveraging popular grievances including unemployment and government corruption.

Abadis power is inside the Green Zone only, but Sadrs power is both inside and outside it, said Mr. Al-Moqdadi. I believe that if politicians do not [approve] the reforms, coming protests by Sadr will be inside the Green Zone.

The proposed new government measures are unlikely to take hold immediately, said Wathiq Al Hashimi, a political analyst at Baghdads Al-Nahrain University.

The new ministers, if they get approved, dont have a magic wand to [perform] miracles, he said.

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