
MORE POLITICAL TURMOIL LIKELY IN IRAQ AS IRAN WAITS IN THE WINGS

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Firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the figure at the center of Iraq's current political tempest, may be agitating and directing his supporters in the name of reform, but he and his followers, who ransacked the national parliament at the weekend, risk worsening Iraq's sectarian divisions.

The ultimate beneficiary of Iraq's unfolding political crisis and weakened government will likely be Iran, say analysts, who warn that Tehran, even though it may not be engineering the Sadrist protests, is seeking to leverage its influence on its neighbor.

And the Sadrists plan to hold more anti-corruption protests in the Iraqi capital Friday as they push for the scrapping of a now-hated quota system that guarantees the country's political factions a share of government jobs and patronage. They present the next immediate challenge for embattled Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, whose own determined reform efforts have stalled.

In the Kurdistan capital of Irbil, to which dozens of Iraqi lawmakers fled over the weekend after Sadrist followers breached the fortified government citadel, the Green Zone, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter vouched for Abadi, saying he remains in a strong position.

Prime Minister Abadi stands for and has been a partner in all of the things that are important to Iraq's future," Carter said Monday, "namely, a country that holds together and doesn't just spiral off into sectarianism.

Despite the U.S. vote of confidence, Iraq's prime minister remains in a tight corner. To head off a repeat of last weekend's protests, he and Iraq's ruling elite need to start implementing reforms, something that Abadi has been unable to do for months.

The weekend invasion of the Green Zone saw Iraqi security personnel refrain from trying to repel protesters. But the demonstrations this Friday could be different and more violent, deepening the political crisis and triggering unpredictable consequences.

There may be units in the Iraqi army, such as the elite Golden Brigade, that might shoot down demonstrators, warned Sadr biographer Patrick Cockburn. Writing in Britain's Independent newspaper, he added, The other main Shiite political factions are also capable of mobilizing their own militias to defend their interests, which they see as being threatened by the Sadrists. This may lead to battles between the different armed groups.

Abadi's reform proposals, which would see the dismantling of much of a governance system that was built up since the U.S. invasion in 2003 to ensure all of the country's competing sects have a share in power, have faced massive opposition from entrenched political interests. Sunni leaders as well as Shiite rivals of Sadr depend on the patronage system and fear the clerics increasing sway over poor, urban Shiites.

Efforts at improvement

Abadi, a Shiite himself, announced measures to improve the country's governance and streamline Iraq's bloated and dysfunctional bureaucracy last August after anti-government protests erupted in several cities across Iraq, with demonstrators venting anger over poor public services and government corruption. But Abadi has been thwarted at every turn in his attempts to effect change.

Earlier this year, he drew up a list of ministers he believed could form a technocratic government that could start dismantling the quota system. But it wasn't accepted by parliamentary factions, who drew up their own list of nominees.

A second list the prime minister unveiled in April prompted anger from Sadrists and reformers, who claimed most of the nominees would merely perpetuate a quota system that has allowed the ruling elite to amass wealth.

And the Sadrist protests demanding the immediate implementation of reforms and the removal of corrupt officials aren't helping Abadi overcome opposition. The clerics' opponents, Shiite as well as Sunni, are now starting to equate calls for reform with Sadrist demands.

The populist Sadrist movement has succeeded in sidelining much of the broad-based civil demands for reform, effectively hijacking the street side of the anti-corruption movement, according to Hassan Mneimneh, an analyst at the Middle East Institute.

Sadr and Iran

Sadr insists his followers protests represent a show of support for Abadi and that he is on the prime ministers side, although he has warned if Abadi doesnt secure parliamentary approval for a cabinet of technocrats, he will destroy the government and force early elections.

Sadrs clout isnt in doubt, as he proved last weekend and in February, when he brought tens of thousands onto the streets of Baghdad to call for reform □ one of the biggest protest rallies in recent Iraqi history.

What is in doubt are the 42-year-olds ultimate objectives. He shot to prominence after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, trading off the name of his father, another populist religious leader, who was assassinated on the orders of Saddam Hussein. Sadr formed the sectarian Shiite Mahdi Army, a militia that fought both the Iraqi government and American forces. By 2008, he was in Qom, Iran. He returned to Iraq in 2011, presenting himself as a very different and more mature leader.

One of his militias has been fighting on the government side against the Islamic State, and he has positioned himself as a less sectarian figure, promoting Iraqi unity and railing against foreign meddling in the country, Western or Iranian. His followers at the weekend protests in Baghdad could be heard chanting against Iran.

His critics accuse him of exploiting popular anger to enhance his political standing □ not only in Baghdad but also in Tehran, which has favored other Shiite leaders over him.

On Monday, Sadr traveled to Iran. His aides would not give details about the trip, but observers see the move as possibly paving the way for Sadr to smooth over the intra-Shiite rivalry in Iraq and to persuade Iran to help resolve the crisis.

Kaynak/Source: