
IRAQ ELECTIONS: COULD IRAN BE THE REAL WINNER?

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By Jeremy Bowen

The Mosul spring festival was held this week for the first time since 2003 - the year of the US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

Organisers said they revived the festival to symbolise the rebirth of Iraq's second city.

Much of it still lies in ruins after last year's war to destroy the jihadist extremists who called themselves Islamic State (IS), and the entity they declared as the caliphate.

The spring festival looked to be a success. Art students painted a mural 50m (165ft) long on the road and floats represented everything from the historic al-Nuri mosque - destroyed by IS - to the local cement factory which is presumably now working at full stretch. Youths marched with Iraqi flags.

Young girls took part dressed as brides while boys were dressed as soldiers. Following up were real fighters, veterans of the war against IS, from elite units of the Iraqi army to tough-looking Shia volunteers from the paramilitary Popular Mobilisation Units known as the Hashd.

They are mainly funded by Iran, and did a lot of the hard fighting against the jihadist extremists.

This spring could be a season of rebirth, for Mosul and the whole of Iraq. Remnants of IS carry out hit-and-run attacks and bombings, but by the blood-soaked standards of this country, security is much improved.

A lot rides on the elections, due to be held on 12 May.

Whoever ends up as prime minister faces huge challenges, not just reconstruction, but holding the country together and taking big steps to stop Iraq descending back into sectarian civil war.

For that to happen, the elections need to produce a government all groups in Iraq can trust. In a country that has seen so much sectarian killing, that is a tall order.

Iraqis can vote for rival lists of candidates. Most are predominantly Shia or Sunni, though the Kurds have their own lists. The three most likely candidates for prime minister are all Shias.

The current prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, heads the Nasr list, which is tipped to get the most votes. But under the Iraqi system he will not be able to form a majority government, which means

negotiations for a coalition that could go on for months.

Most people believe that Mr Abadi's most serious rival for prime minister is the veteran paramilitary commander Hadi al-Amiri. He heads the Fatah list, which has become the political home of the Shia fighters of the Hashd and their supporters.

Mr Amiri, and Fatah, believe that the Iraqi people will show their gratitude for the sacrifices that the Hashd made in the fight against IS.

The third frontrunner is Nouri al-Maliki, the former prime minister. He was forced out of office in 2014 after IS swept through Iraq, capturing Mosul and great swathes of predominantly Sunni territory.

Mr Maliki's sectarian policies so alienated Sunnis that, at first, many welcomed the jihadists. The brutality of IS quickly changed minds, but by then the jihadists had declared their caliphate.

Mr Maliki's past probably means he cannot be prime minister. But he is powerful and might want to be the kingmaker. A European diplomat said Mr Maliki was "on manoeuvres".

Iraq needs some good news after so many years of appalling suffering and this election, optimists say, could be a turning point. The bright scenario is that Haidar al-Abadi will win a second term and then work hard to bridge the divisions between Iraq's sects. Getting the economy right would help.

But this is Iraq, full of weapons, grudges and resentments, so there are always risks.

Sunnis I have spoken to are nervous about the Hashd fighters and their leader and candidate, Mr Amiri. He is very close to his fellow Shias in Iran, which for him is an entirely natural alliance.

It also makes the Iranians, through their friends in the Hashd, the strongest foreign force in Iraq.

The Americans have troops here, too. After US President Donald Trump's decision to abandon the Iran nuclear deal, there is obvious scope for trouble.

Iraq is fragile after the battering it has had since the Americans and their allies invaded in 2003.

If this election produces a result that most Iraqis can accept, and a government that most of them do not fear, this country has a chance to rebuild and to reconcile. But sadly, that is no certainty.

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