IRAQ'S AL-SADR CALLS FOR ‘INDEPENDENT' PRIME MINISTER

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Prominent Iraqi Shia cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr on Thursday called on Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to resign from his Dawa Party in return for securing a third term in office.

Since last week, Iraqi electoral officials have been manually recounting ballots cast in the countrys May 12 parliamentary poll, official results of which remain dogged by dispute.

According to those results, Al-Sadr's Sairoon coalition dominated the vote, winning 54 parliamentary seats, followed by a Hashd al-Shaabi-linked coalition (47 seats) and al-Abadi's Victory Bloc (42 seats).

Al-Sadr seeks to form a new government far from sectarianism or narrow political interests with a mandate to fight corruption and carry out long-awaited reforms.

Were looking at new ways of drawing up coalitions in line with our reform plans, Diaa al-Asadi, head of al-Sadrs political bureau, told Anadolu Agency.

According to al-Asadi, talks remain underway between Sairoon; the Victory Bloc; the Hashd al-Shaabi-linked Al-Fatah Bloc; the National Wisdom movement (led by Ammar al-Hakim); and the Al-Wataniya Bloc (led by Vice-President Iyad Allawi).

Nevertheless, the choice of prime minister remains subject to considerable debate, al-Asadi said.

It appears that PM al-Abadi still has a chance to secure a third term in office if he is willing to resign from the Islamic Dawa Party, of which former PM Nouri al-Maliki is also leading member.

According to al-Asadi, al-Abadis resignation from the Dawa Party is a chief demand of most leading political blocs, including al-Sadrs Sairoon coalition.

Iraq faces numerous challenges at this sensitive stage, he said. We need a prime minister who enjoys independence and authority.

Al-Sadr also holds al-Maliki responsible for the Daesh terrorist groups ability to overrun much of the country -- including Mosul -- in mid-2014.

Al-Asadi also downplayed the extent of foreign influence on Iraqs electoral process.

Some parties may enjoy the support of certain entities, he said, but as long as these parties adhere to the national program -- and arent bound by foreign interests -- there should not be a problem.

Known for his hostility to the U.S., al-Sadr led a faction of Shia fighters against foreign forces during the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011.

He is also one of a small handful of Iraqi Shia political leaders who are not closely associated with Iran.

Since the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was overthrown by U.S. and U.K. forces in 2003, both Washington and Tehran have played significant roles in the talks leading up to the formation of successive Iraqi governments.

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