
AFTER IRAQ VIOLENCE, SHIITE HARDLINERS SEIZE ADVANTAGE

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Baghdad

Deadly protests in Iraq have exposed a rift within the country's Shiite political factions benefiting hardliners ready to embrace authoritarianism, experts say.

Many Shiite leaders, particularly in pro-Iran armed groups, believe the anti-government unrest was the product of "foreign conspiracies", said Renad Mansour, a researcher at the Chatham House think-tank.

Iran itself said the protests were a conspiracy aimed at weakening its ties with neighbouring Iraq, which have grown stronger since the US-led invasion toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

For Mansour, the protests revealed important fault lines in Iraq, "not just between citizens and elite, but between the different sides" of the Shiite establishment.

Calm has prevailed since Tuesday in Iraq after the country descended into violence last week as protests calling for an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment escalated into calls for a complete overhaul of the political system.

More than 100 people were killed, mostly by live fire, and more than 6,000 wounded.

For hardline pro-Iran forces, demonstrators taking to the streets to demand the fall of the government is "an existential threat that needs to be snuffed out", according to Fanar Haddad, an expert at Singapore University's Middle East Institute.

- 'Saviours of Iraq' -

To protect the system, certain factions are willing to turn to repression, Mansour said, including "killing protesters, turning off the internet, (and) intimidating civil society".

The same intimidation techniques were deployed last summer in Basra, he noted, following a week of social unrest.

That could explain why last week's protests were muted in the southern oil-rich city near the

Iranian border.

"Most people who didn't go out this year said it was because they were scared," Mansour said.

In Baghdad though, crushing dissent is "much more challenging".

The idea an Iranian takeover in Iraq faces resistance "both from the street and from different elements of the state", Mansour said.

"Whether it's the PM, president, speaker, or chief justice, they all have an institutional role but they are all quite weak leaders and don't have de facto power," he added.

"They may be for the protests and against what's happening, but the question is to what extent they can push back against it."

According to Haddad, the unrest combined with weak institutional power "will work in the favour of the more hardline elements" of the Hashed al-Shaabi.

The paramilitary force was formed in 2014 at the call of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani to battle back the Islamic State group, but elements within it now seek to solidify power.

"Once they've positioned themselves as saviours of Iraq, they can position themselves as saviours of this government," Haddad said.

Protesters accused Sistani, Iraq's Shiite spiritual leader, of not taking a clear stand on their behalf despite his power to influence the government.

His main suggestion was to form a commission of technocrats to monitor the government on behalf of citizens stricken by unemployment and poverty.

- 'More stick than carrot' -

As the protests peaked, firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr had called on the government to resign. While that now seems unlikely, Sadr is still able to mobilise his followers, who have previously paralysed the country with sit-ins.

The former militia leader turned anti-corruption figurehead could again be forced to call for street protests if he faces blowback in parliament.

The Hashed's political arm Fatah could push to dismiss Sadr's 54 deputies and four ministers.

If Sadr were sent into opposition, he would join other pro-reform Shiites leaders, including former prime minister Haider al-Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim.

In the short-term, Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi's government looks likely to survive following promises of a cabinet reshuffle and lawsuits against corruption.

But an absence of radical reforms will only exacerbate the problems in Iraq, experts say, in a country ravaged by four decades of conflict and ranked as the 12th most corrupt in the world.

Authorities used "much more stick than carrot" in quelling the unrest, Haddad noted.

The reforms offered up to protesters following an emergency cabinet meeting "just betrays a rentier mentality all over again," he said.

"Using oil wealth -- which they don't really have at the moment given the budget deficit -- to buy the acquiescence of the people."

This response is not indicative of "a political class who have received a wakeup call," he said. "But it should be."

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