

Tensions Mount Over the Failure to Form a Government After Months of Political Deadlock in Iraq

Iraq has witnessed the outbreak of a serious political crisis in recent months. Populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr has urged his supporters to continue their sit-in inside the Iraqi parliament, and called for an overhaul of the nation's delicate constitution, a dissolution of parliament, and early elections. The paralysis has taken shape after al-Sadr failed to form a government within the last 10 months since elections in October of 2021. The efforts of Iranian-backed politicians and al-Sadr rivals in parliament to try and do so has sparked al-Sadr's calls for his supporters to take action. Iraq, which already has been struggling to form a strong continual government for the past couple of decades, sees itself at the brink of complete governmental collapse. Human rights activists and security analysts have raised alarms over the possibility for this political crisis to turn violent, with counter protests growing and in close proximity to the al-Sadr demonstrators. Furthermore, the foreign meddling in Iraq's government increases the possibility for the crisis to deteriorate and worsen humanitarian conditions.

The protesters stormed Iraq's parliament which resides in Baghdad's "Green-Zone," a region of the city which houses Iraq's governmental buildings and international embassies, including the American embassy. The green zone is Baghdad's most heavily fortified area, however despite Iraqi police tear gasses and the barracking of parliament, they were overrun by the protestors – showing an aggressive and strongly motivated political movement. Meanwhile, one of the most alarming elements is the fact that next to al-Sadr protesters are growing and large-scale counter demonstrations, which have security officials worried about the potential for clashes between the two camps. With the green zone now under control of rival protestors, the possibility for the situation to erode at the expense of Iraq's fragile institutions is evident.

The ten-month political stalemate over Iraq's parliament has already weighed on the country's institutions and voters. With growing frustration and little sign either side wants to negotiate, the trajectory of the crisis points to a legitimate fear of an increase in hostilities. In a public address, al-Sadr told his supporters he was not going to negotiate with the opposition, with Iran also calling for parliament to be dissolved. It appears that no matter how the crisis continues, Iran will be a crucial player. Issue experts and analysts of the region worry regarding further proxy conflicts between Iran and Gulf Arab states, with Iraq being seen by some as the next "battleground." With unstable institutions, some have voiced warnings that the situation could devolve into a similar scenario as what has transpired in Yemen.

Human rights activists and the international community have called for both sides to resist any potential damaging escalation. The United Nations has called for the right to protests, but urged for all parties to ensure that the people and institutions in Iraq are kept safe and secure. While the crisis remains in its relative early stages, without significant improvements to ensure an increase in hostilities and interference is avoided, it could degenerate into a situation with serious humanitarian and international security implications.