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Asia times online

Muqtada's star on the rise again

By Abeer Mohammed
3/27/2010

BAGHDAD - The movement led by anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr is poised to make a dramatic return to the forefront of Iraq's Shi'ite politics, combining its success in recent elections with the anticipated elevation of its leader's religious status.

The Sadrists are the main faction in the Iraqi National Alliance, which is projected to have won 68 seats in the new parliament. The bloc was the main challenger for the Shi'ite vote against Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who has been regarded with suspicion by the Sadrists since the Iraqi military led a crackdown on their militia in 2008.

Full results from the elections were due late Friday. After 95% of votes were counted ex-premier Iyad Allawi's Iraqiya bloc and Maliki's State of Law Alliance were on course to win 91 seats each, with protracted coalition building the likely outcome.

Alongside growing leverage over their [political](#) rivals, the Sadrists are expected to enjoy greater spiritual authority among their supporters as Muqtada continues his [studies](#) to become an eminent Shi'ite scholar, or [ayatollah](#).

Officials close to the 36-year-old cleric say he is making swift progress in his schooling at a seminary in the Iranian [holy city](#) of Qom. It is unclear whether he will graduate soon, as most ayatollahs spend several decades attaining the [rank](#).

It is also as yet unclear whether the Sadrists will enter government or form an opposition.

Whatever they decide, analysts say the Sadrists will be impossible to ignore in the new [parliament](#).

"They will have their word in every decision," Abdullah Jaafar, a retired professor of political sciences in Baghdad, said.

As the most blatantly anti-American of the Shi'ite political groups, Muqtada's movement is particularly well-placed to capitalize on the planned withdrawal of most [United States military](#) forces from Iraq later this year.

"If the Americans withdraw at the expected time, the Sadrists will tell their [followers](#) that they kicked the troops out," Jaafar said. He added that the Sadrists would oppose any attempt to extend the Americans' stay in Iraq.

As long as the pullout proceeds as planned, Muqtada's movement is unlikely to seek a violent confrontation with the [US military](#), according to Patrick Cockburn, a British journalist and author of a book on Sadr.

"Why on earth should they disrupt the withdrawal since it's what they wanted anyway," he said.

Cockburn added that he expected the remnants of Muqtada's militia to stick to the terms of a current ceasefire, while the movement channeled its energies into politics.

"Sadrists are surprising in being slightly more numerous and better organized than people imagine," he said.

A member of a prominent Shi'ite religious family that was persecuted by Saddam Hussein, Muqtada emerged as a popular leader in the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003. His relative youth and fiery opposition to the American presence won him many followers among the urban Shi'ite poor.

His armed supporters were gathered into a militia, known as the Mahdi Army, that fought several battles with US-led troops. The militia was also implicated in attacks on Sunni and rival Shi'ite groups during the worst years of sectarian conflict in the middle of the last decade.

In 2008, the Mahdi Army was severely weakened after government troops attacked its strongholds in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The assault roughly coincided with Muqtada's decision to move to Iran to pursue his studies.

From Qom, Muqtada has maintained contact with his followers through hand-written notes and sermons, channeled through his organization's offices across Iraq. His movement has shed some of its martial image and sought to emphasize its social, religious and political programs.

In interviews with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Muqtada's allies linked his eventual return to Iraq to the completion of his studies and the withdrawal of American troops.

"Muqtada al-Sadr will not return to an occupied Iraq," Nasser al-Rubaie, a Sadrist candidate and

a deputy in the outgoing parliament, said. "He has said more than once that he will only return when the American occupiers have left."

Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, a spokesman for Muqtada, denied claims that the cleric had moved to Iran to avoid arrest under a warrant issued against him by the US military. "He is not afraid of coming home but he is busy with his studies in Iran right now," he said.

Muqtada's followers believe their leader's theological studies will enhance their standing in parliament and on the street. "There is no doubt that gaining the rank of ayatollah will empower the Sadrist bloc," Rubaie said.

"It will also broaden the Sadrists' base by giving those who love Sadr the chance to follow him as a *marja*," he added. A *marja* is the title given to a Shi'ite scholar, almost always of ayatollah rank, who is entrusted by his followers to provide guidance on all aspects of daily life.

Currently, most Shi'ite Iraqis, including Muqtada's followers, regard Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their *marja*. An elderly cleric based in the holy city of Najaf, Sistani called on Iraqis to turn out and vote but did not endorse any political faction in the latest election.

Prominent Shi'ite politicians who are not part of the Sadrist group acknowledge that Muqtada's theological studies will enhance his political standing. However, they question the extent to which his movement will be able to eclipse its rivals.

Muqtada's studies "will make him wiser and enable him to take more accurate decisions in politics", said Muna Zalzal, a deputy with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI, a major Shi'ite Islamist party that partnered the Sadrists in the recent election.

While the Sadrists as a bloc would grow more powerful, Zalzal said she did not believe they would necessarily gain more followers once Muqtada became a *marja*. "Sistani is the highest *marja* in Iraq," she said.

Abdul Hadi al-Hasani, a deputy from Da'wa, Maliki's Shi'ite party, said Muqtada was still many years away from qualifying as an ayatollah.

"It is not easy for anyone to get such a rank in a few years," he said. "Clerics study for decades to get this rank. A *marja* is a big responsibility and it is still too early for Sadr."

Officials close to Muqtada said, however, that he was expected to qualify quicker than other clerics. "His family is known to be geniuses," Rubaie said, pointing out that Muqtada's father and his father's cousin both qualified as ayatollahs while still relatively young.

A source close to the cleric who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to release such information said Muqtada expected to be appointed ayatollah within three to seven years.

Some Sunni Arabs said they feared Muqtada's growing theological authority would ultimately

strengthen the Mahdi Army, which they associate with a campaign of violence that killed thousands of their community.

"We respect Sadr but we fear his militia," Sabah Adil, a [government employee](#) from Baghdad, said. "They killed Sunni everywhere. We pretended to be Shi'ite at the time."

Nebras Sami, an arts student from Baghdad in his late twenties, said he would consider leaving Iraq if Muqtada became an ayatollah. "If he got [the degree](#), no one will dare prevent him from rebuilding his militia," he said.

Mithal al-Alosi, a secular member of parliament from a Sunni Arab family, said he was not against Muqtada's pursuit of theological study but was worried about its possible impact.

"We are not concerned about Muqtada al-Sadr or his rank but about the extent to which [this] will be politicized locally and regionally," he said.

Alosi added that he feared for Muqtada's safety in Iran, and believed he might be vulnerable to manipulation by the Tehran government.

"Having Sadr staying in Iran is not good for him or his followers. For example, if a suspicious edict is issued in his name while he is in Iran, we cannot confirm whether or not it was issued by him," Alosi said.

Muqtada's supporters maintain that his studies will strengthen their movement, and dismiss fears of a revival of sectarian violence.

"The Sunni and Shi'ite are sons of one Iraq, we are brothers," Amir al-Kenani, a Sadrist candidate, said. "Terrorists tried to stoke strife among us. They failed in the past and we will not allow them to succeed in the future."