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Keys to the political crisis in Iraq: 11 months of blockade and a leader calling for revolution



Sources: El Diario [Photo: Muqtada al Sadr]

The assault on Iraq's presidential palace by supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the country's most influential Shiite clerics and politicians, has killed dozens. This is the climax – though probably not the end – of a long political crisis that erupted almost a year ago, that has pitted and split the Shiite bloc in two and that has caused other moments of great tension, with two assaults on Parliament and a sit-in of several weeks in the chamber.

The assault on the presidential palace was triggered after the announcement of Sadr's withdrawal from political life as he could not form a government.

Sadr, the most voted force in the 2021 elections, has spent months trying, unsuccessfully, to form a government. In response, he called for revolution and called for the dissolution of Parliament to eventually announce his withdrawal from political life, triggering the assault on the presidential palace by his followers. However, several experts recall that Sadr has announced his retirement on numerous occasions in the past and has never been the final one.

Early elections

In October 2021, Iraq held early elections after nearly a year of protests that left hundreds dead – 669, according to the NGO Iraq War Crimes Documentation Center.

The Sadrist Movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr on a nationalist base opposed to foreign interference – especially against Iran and the US – was the most voted force and won 73 of the 329 seats in Parliament, an insufficient figure. To form a government, the chamber must first vote for the president, who must be elected by two-thirds on the first ballot or a simple majority on the second ballot.

The Sadrist Movement tried to form a coalition with the support of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the (Sunni) Progress Party to achieve a simple majority, but "the Supreme Court's ruling on Article 70 of the Constitution made it difficult to achieve a quorum for the election of the president," Farhad Alaaldin, president of the Iraq Advisory Council, told elDiario.es. Such a ruling requires a two-thirds presence of all MPs in the president's vote and many opponents of Sadr have boycotted parliamentary sessions to block the appointment of a prime minister.

Blocking and resignation en bloc

Its main opposition bloc is the Coordination Framework, which is not a coalition or a party, but a platform of multiple and diverse Shiite political formations that control 130 seats and therefore have the ability to block the formation of a government. Within the Coordination Framework are the Shiite forces closest to Iran, among which the figure of former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, who during his government carried out a sectarian policy.

"Sadr found himself unable to continue," Says Alaaldin. In a surprising move and after more than eight months of political blockade, Sadr ordered all his deputies to submit their resignation, which he announced as "a sacrifice to liberate the country and the people from an unknown destiny." At first, the CcF did not have a definite idea of what was going on: "It is not clear what Sadr is trying to achieve this time. We don't have a clear idea of what his next move will be."

"It was a strategic mistake he made, his parliamentary majority with the tripartite alliance was strong and he could have easily dissolved Parliament if he had stayed," Alaaldin says.

Assault on Parliament and ultimatum to justice



Photo: Images of the seizure of Parliament last July by followers of the Shiite cleric (Ameer Al-Mohammedawi/DPA)

After the resignation of the 'sadrists' en bloc, the Coordination Framework took over and tried to form a government with Mohammed al Sudani as prime minister, which outraged the followers of the Shiite cleric, who ended up storming parliament on July 27 and thus blocking Sudani's vote. Two hours later, they returned home under sadr's own order: "Your message has been heard, you have terrorized the corrupt. Go back safely to your homes."

Three days later, protesters again stormed the chamber. This time there were more than a hundred injured and there was no order to retreat. The sit-in in Parliament lasted for

weeks. Sadr had gone from wanting to form a government to calling for revolution: "This spontaneous and peaceful revolution that has liberated the Green Zone is a golden opportunity for all people stigmatized by injustice, terrorism and corruption." Sadr now advocated a "fundamental change" of the "political system and the Constitution."

In addition, Sadr gave the judiciary a week-long ultimatum to dissolve parliament. "If not, the revolutionaries will take a new position," the Iraqi leader tweeted. However, the Supreme Judicial Council responded on August 14 stating that it has no authority to dissolve the chamber." In response, the 'Sadrist' demonstrators, who had been occupying Parliament for three weeks, staged another sit-in outside the Supreme Court.

Assault on the palace, dozens of deaths and apologies

In this context, Sadr announced his retirement from politics this week, which triggered the assault on the presidential palace on Monday and caused heavy clashes that have left at least 35 dead. Finally, Sadr on Tuesday ordered his followers to withdraw.

"If in 60 minutes they do not withdraw from the sit-in in front of Parliament, I will stop being part of the Sadrist current," he said. "I apologize to the Iraqi people, as they are the only ones harmed by what is happening."

Although the crisis has not been resolved, Alaaldin points out that "the political process should return to its path, forming a government and calling another early election." Not all experts agree. Hamzeh Hadad, an analyst at the European Council on Foreign Relations *think tank*, said in an article on Aug. 26 that "another early election would be a response to Sadr's machinations rather than the organic protests that led to the 2021 election." "Yielding to pressure from Sadr and his followers would only harm Iraqi democracy."

Hadad also points out that the Shiite cleric has already threatened other times to withdraw from politics "and always ends up backing down." Sajad Jiyad, an Iraq analyst at the *think tank* The Century Foundation, agrees: "This is the eighth time he's retired from politics, so I don't think it's a retreat, but a small tactical maneuver."

Source: https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/claves-crisis-politica-irak-11-meses-bloqueo-lider-llamando-revolucion_1_9276637.html

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