

Iraq Cabinet remains incomplete as Parliament defers key appointments

Author:

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BAGHDAD: Iraq's prime minister has failed once again to make new Cabinet appointments after his nominees could not muster the requisite parliamentary support, dashing hopes for a breakthrough in filling the vacant positions.

Iraqi lawmakers and negotiators told Arab News that the two biggest political blocs in Parliament on Tuesday showed no signs of having reached a consensus on the nominees for several key ministries, including the interior and defense, which act as power bases in a fractured political landscape.

Abdul Mahdi's appointment as prime minister in September had raised public expectations after a prolonged spell of government deadlock following the general elections of May. However, the Shiite political blocs whose backing paved the way for the 76-year-old former oil minister's return to government have differed on the candidates for the other posts.

On assuming office, Abdul Mahdi was given 30 days to assemble a Cabinet to be approved by Parliament. The political jockeying had been expected to intensify as regional patrons were seen as reluctant to allow key ministries to go to candidates backed by their rivals.

The political deadlock surfaced in late October after 16 out of the 22 candidates proposed by Abdul Mahdi won approval. The rest were rejected by the Reform Alliance, led by the Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, which remains at loggerheads with the Iran-backed Al-Binna'a Alliance led by Hadi Al-Amiri, the commander of Badr Organization, Iraq's most powerful Shiite armed faction.

Each candidate needs at least 166 votes out of 329 in Parliament to be approved. Both Reform and Al-Binna'a have been unable on their own to secure the requisite support for their candidates, compelling each to rely on the other's backing.

Abdul Mahdi has sought to circumvent the deadlock by holding negotiations on the contentious candidates individually. Three of the candidates won the Parliament's approval last week. Two more will join them after the previous nominees were dropped in the latest development. In Monday's session, Abdul Mahdi's picks for the Education and Immigration Ministries were approved. However, Maj. Gen. Faisal Fanar Al-Jarb, a candidate for the Ministry of Defense, was excluded by voting, while voting on the candidates for the posts of interior and justice ministers was postponed.

Disagreement between Reform, which says it wants to limit outside influence in Iraqi politics, and Al-Binna'a over the nominees for the interior and defense portfolios is at the heart of the current stalemate. Reform wanted retired Al-Jarba, a former commander of Saddam Hussein's special squadron, to head the Defense Ministry. Al-Binna'a objected on the grounds that Al-Jarba's role in the deposed Saddam regime disqualified him for a Cabinet post under the program of de-baathification.

For its part, Al-Binna wanted Falih Al-Fayadh, who has just become the

National Security Adviser, to take charge of the powerful Interior Ministry. Al-Fayadh, who was sacked in August from his dual posts as head of the Iran-linked Popular Mobilization Units and the national security advisor by caretaker Prime Minister Haidar Abadi, is viewed by Reform as “the man of Iran.”

Arab News has learned that a last-minute deal reached in Monday’s session by the negotiators of the two blocs resulted in Al-Jarba’s exclusion and Al-Fayadh’s replacement by a new candidate for the interior portfolio.

“Al-Jarba did not get the required votes for his approval, so he is formally excluded as a ministerial candidate,” an Al-Binna’a negotiator told Arab News.

He added that “we agreed Al-Fayadh will be replaced soon but the vote (for the new nominee for interior minister) will take place in the new year.” The Interior Ministry had been under the control of ministers close to Iran since 2010.



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Iraqi cities preparing for large Christmas celebrations Iraq appoints two more ministers but government still incomplete

Iraqi cities preparing for large Christmas celebrations

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Mon, 2018-12-24 22:10

BAGHDAD: With security threats at their lowest level in five years, Iraqi cities are preparing for largescale Christmas celebrations, Christian clerics and officials told Arab News on Sunday.

Local authorities nationwide have set up large decorated Christmas trees in main squares. Shops in Kardaa, a neighborhood in southern Baghdad that includes many churches, are filled with Christmas decorations and accessories.

Celebrations this year follow the declaration of the defeat of Daesh in Iraq. The terrorist group had killed and displaced Christians in the north of the country following its sweeping territorial gains in June 2014.

Some cites such as Ramadi, capital of the Sunni-majority Anbar province in western Iraq, is celebrating Christmas for the first time since 2003, locals told Arab News.

"The security situation this year is the most stable in a long time, thank God," Ara Badalian, pastor of the Evangelical Baptist Church in Baghdad, told Arab News.

"We're more relaxed and free to practice our ritual ceremonies this time compared to previous years, and we've extended our celebration hours to 10 p.m. instead of 8 p.m.," he said.

"The number of festivals we've planned is the most in many years, and participation is much wider and not limited to Christians, as our friends from other sects are keen to participate in our celebrations."

Baghdad and other cities have witnessed a significant drop in the number of terrorist attacks in the past three years.

The number of casualties across the country in November was the lowest in six years, according to statistics from the UN Mission in Iraq.

Troops have been deployed near churches, malls and main squares to guard against potential terrorist attacks.

After Christmas, Iraqis see in the new year with street celebrations accompanied by music and fireworks.

Many clubs, cafes and malls hold free parties with famous singers throughout the last week of December.

"It's an occasion to see all my family members to celebrate New Year's Eve and enjoy time with them," Rawaa Abdulridha, a young lawyer, told Arab News. "We're hungry for joy. We're exhausted because war and death have dominated our streets for many years, so the time has come for some joy."





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Real Christmas trees find buyers in the desert among UAE expats
Pilgrims gather at Jesus's traditional birthplace in Bethlehem for Christmas

Protests, strike pose mounting challenge for Sudan president

Author:

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Mon, 2018-12-24 12:55

KHARTOUM: Doctors in Sudan went on strike on Monday, feeding into deadly protests against bread prices that represent one of the biggest challenges President Omar Al-Bashir has faced in nearly three decades in power. A gathering of professionals from various sectors had issued a call on Sunday to strike as fresh protests hit cities – including Omdurman, close to the capital Khartoum – late into the evening.

The strike “started at 08:00 am (0600 GMT) in the morning” and hospital workers were the first to take part, said Mohammed Al-Assam, a member of a committee of doctors.

The committee said in a statement that it would submit an official demand on Tuesday for the “president’s immediate resignation in response to the uprising by the Sudanese people... (and the) formation of a transitional government.”

The protest movement has hit around a dozen cities since Wednesday, after the government tripled the price of bread, in a country beset by economic crisis. Eight people have died in demonstrations in the eastern cities of Al-Gadaref and Atbara during clashes with security forces, according to officials and witnesses.

But others have spoken of higher death tolls.

Opposition leader Sadiq Al-Mahdi said on Saturday that 22 people had died, denouncing what he called “armed repression” against a legitimate protest movement.

Mahdi, Sudan’s last democratically elected prime minister, was overthrown in a coup that brought Bashir to power in 1989.

Pushed into exile several times, Mahdi returned to his homeland on Wednesday, the day protests began.

After initially railing against the high cost of living, some protesters have also adopted the slogan used in the 2011 Arab Spring – “the people want the fall of the regime.” Mahdi has likewise called for the government to go.

“The main reason for the protests is economic and linked to high prices but the roots of the economic crisis are political,” according to Abdellattif Al-Bouni, a political science professor.

“The political failures of the government, errors and bad management” explain why people are so angry, he said.

In January, protests erupted against the high price of basic foodstuffs, but were quickly quelled by the authorities, which arrested opposition leaders and militants.

Several opposition party members – accused of vandalism during the ongoing protests – have been arrested, the official Suna news agency said on Sunday.



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[‘Yellow Vest’ rally against delay in Lebanese government formation](#)

Sun, 2018-12-23 23:51

BEIRUT: The Lebanese capital, Beirut, witnessed angry protests in response to the general situation in the country and amid a further delay in the

formation of a new Cabinet.

About 3,000 demonstrators responded to a call on social media and gathered in Martyrs' Square, carrying banners bearing their grievances and criticizing the country's leaders. They chanted slogans demanding social freedom and calling for the overthrow of the regime.

An Internal Security Forces (ISF) officer told Arab News: "Security Forces knew about the protest through social media and took all the necessary measures," he added, noting that "none of the demonstrators had permission to demonstrate from the Ministry of Interior."

The protesters had various objectives. Some wore yellow vests, some hid their faces, and others even brought their children or dogs along. Many of them had their own tale of personal suffering.

"I am unemployed, I do not have any kind of health insurance and taxes are imposed on everything," said Hassan Khamis, 20 years old. "I came here so that my voice can be heard. I am from the southern suburbs of Beirut, but I do not follow any of its political parties."

Cinderella Abou Chakra, who wore a yellow vest to demonstrate against corruption, said that she did so not to imitate French protesters, but to show that they too suffer from high taxes and low salaries.

"I am a retired employee and my husband was fired from his job because his employers could not afford to pay him the minimum wage anymore. I am part of the civil society and I hope that this non-sectarian protest will bring change and accountability."

Activists from the political party Sabaa also took part in the demonstrations.

"They are bringing back the same faces to the government in a different format, while each of them is taking their share of the benefits," said Ali Hassan, a Lebanese army veteran.

"The solution lies in the formation of a technocratic government not related to any of the political parties. It should be considered a national rescue government and not a national unity government."

A member of a group of masked young men told Arab News that they were from the southern city of Tyre.

They had come together through a Whatsapp group chat to stand against corruption and to express their frustration with the politicians.

"They are not smarter than us. We are aware of what they are doing. They want to treat us like herds of sheep of different colors," he said.

Participants raised the Lebanese flag and sang the national anthem. Some also held the flag of the Nejme football club to reaffirm that "they are participating as civilians and are not affiliated with any political party."

Protesters then moved from Martyrs' Square to the nearby Riad Al-Solh Square, close to the Lebanese Parliament and the Grand Serail, the seat of the government.

They held banners that read "We want a government now" and "Approve the law to recover stolen funds."

Among the protesters were three Muslim clerics who are social media activists representing the Sunnis and the Shiites.

"We are participating to say that the situation has become unbearable. Hunger and economic crises are looming. Politicians must recognize the extent of people's dissatisfaction," said Sheikh Mohammed Ali Al-Hajj Al-Alami.

Sheikh Waleed Alama noted that: "Some people in Lebanon sold their minds to the political parties. We are here today to make heard the voices of those holding on to coexistence."

Malak, a 39-year-old social media influencer, said: "I have been unemployed for three years. I am one of the people who called for the protests because the situation can no longer be tolerated. What the politicians are doing is very provocative. Our government does not care about us, it does not listen to the suffering of its people."

The demonstrators tried to approach the metal barriers set in front of the government's headquarters, while some threw water bottles at the security forces.

Later, they divided into smaller groups and closed some roads in Beirut such as Hamra Street, one of the major thoroughfares in the city, setting garbage bins on fire.

The Lebanese Army moved in to reopen the roads, and asked the protesters not to damage public and private properties and to preserve the peaceful nature of the demonstrations.









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Formation of new Lebanese government delayed
Lebanon's Hariri hopes government will be finalised on Friday

[UAE best place for religious tourism: Sikh leader](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-23 21:43

DUBAI: The UAE is the best place for religious tourism given the diversity and beauty of its places of worship, said the chairman of the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar in Dubai, the largest Sikh temple in the Gulf.

Be it mosques, churches, or Sikh or Hindu temples, "all these places of worship showcase the beauty of peace and tolerance in the UAE," Surender Singh Kandhari, who has been living in the country since 1975, told Arab News.

The UAE has declared 2019 the Year of Tolerance. Kandhari said the country is a living example of tolerance and being a bridge between peoples of different cultures in a respectful environment that rejects extremism and emphasizes

acceptance of the other.

“It’s the only country where more than 180 different nationalities live together in harmony. You can’t find such an example anywhere in the world,” he added.

“This is perhaps the only country where followers of every faith will find their places of worship. These places aren’t meant for worship only. They’re gorgeous pieces of art and architecture,” he said.

“Every building has its own story to share, and everyone is welcome to find solace in any place of worship. Everyone is allowed to go to any place of worship. This kind of peace and tolerance one can’t find in any other part of the world.”

Visionary leadership

The multi-story gurdwara was opened in January 2012 at a cost of more than \$20 million.

Praising the UAE’s construction of a Sikh temple “in the heart of an Islamic state,” Kandhari said: “To add to the joy and sense of wellbeing, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, vice president and prime minister of the UAE, bestowed a piece of land free of charge for the Sikhs to build their temple.”

Kandhari added: “This could only happen in a country such as the UAE, which has such a visionary and big-hearted leadership.”



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Media ‘plays a vital role in fostering tolerance’Brazil conference highlights Islamic tolerance, coexistence