

Shias Demand Free Elections

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Demonstrators heed Sistani's call whether they understand it or not.

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Baghdad and Basra this week, rallying to the calls of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for the direct election of any new Iraqi government.

"Only an elected government will be legitimate," chanted marchers on January 15 in the predominantly Shia port city of Basra, where an estimated 30,000-100,000 marchers participated in what seemed the country's largest political demonstration since the end of the war.

Just four days later, on January 19, teachers in Baghdad turned out with their students and tens of thousands of other Iraqis for another election protest that filled the broad boulevards near the University of Mustansiriya.

Although the Shia marchers claimed that many Sunnis joined the protests, at least two sat on the sidelines in their juice bar, and watched it pass.

"We want democracy, but all this is for Ali al-Sistani, and we are Sunni," one of them said.

Sistani has harshly criticised plans already approved by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Coalition-appointed Iraqi Governing Council to install a transitional government through a series of caucuses.

Aides of the ayatollah fear the United States will use its influence over the caucuses to ensure the election of candidates it favours.

The Imam of the Sadr al-Islam mosque, Sheikh Mohammed Haydar, said the Shia are demanding free elections in particular because they fear an unelected national assembly will not truly reflect their numbers in Iraq.

Marchers dismissed US claims that direct elections are logistically impossible due to the lack of electoral rolls and the lack of security.

"The Governing Council must find a mechanism to hold elections, and not search for excuses," said Hashem Hassan, a humanities professor at Mustansiriya university, marching alongside his students.

"The masses have expressed their opinion with this demonstration, and the Governing Council must now implement the will of the people," Hassan said.

"If the Coalition troops and Governing Council don't agree on elections, we have other measures that we can take – civil disobedience, general strikes," said Hashem al-Awadi, who works in Sistani's representative office in Baghdad.

For many Iraqis, the substance of the protest did not seem as important as the man who called it.

"We came from [the central region of] Diala with many thousands to support the marja'iyah [the Shia scholarly institution of which Sistani is the most senior member]," said teacher Mohammed Abboud.

When asked why he was protesting, one marcher in Baghdad said, "I want to liberate it." Asked what he wanted to liberate, he said, "I don't know." Asked why he came, he said, "I heard Sistani's ruling, and I wanted to support it."

Many of Iraq's Sunni Arabs, meanwhile, expressed ambivalence about the calls for direct elections. While many Sunnis are critical of the US-led occupation, they are also leery of Shia political power.

Prominent Sunni preacher Sheikh Abdel Sittar Abdel Jabbar conceded that the demonstrations "expressed the opinion of the Iraqi people" regarding direct elections.

"General elections are a legitimate right of the people, written in Islam... We don't disagree with the principle of elections," he said.

But he objected to the timing of any proposed elections, saying that "while US troops are here, and Iraq is conquered, we perhaps cannot run free and fair elections".

"We must put elections under the control of the United Nations or the Arab League. Under one of them we can have our sovereignty," the sheikh said.

He also denied the commonly held belief that the Sunni leadership wished to postpone elections out of fear that the Shia would dominate any directly elected government.

"We are not afraid of the ballot box, because there are many Sunnis in Iraq," he said.

Sunnis will doubtless be watching events closely though as Shia demonstrators plan more marches in the days ahead.

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