

International

Iraq deadline to appoint PM looms, protesters unyielding

President Saleh to pick premier if parliament fails to reach a consensus

BAGHDAD: Iraqi political leaders faced a midnight deadline yesterday to choose a new prime minister to run a country shaken by months of unprecedented street protests that have left hundreds dead.

If parliament fails to propose a candidate from inter-party negotiations to replace outgoing Adel Abdel Mahdi, then President Barham Saleh has the right to appoint a premier himself. But if lawmakers do not approve his choice and the post remains vacant at midnight, then the constitution will place Saleh himself in the role, though for just 15 days.

The current parliament is the most divided in Iraq's recent history. On Wednesday, deputies failed to agree on amending the electoral law—the only significant reform proposed by authorities to appease protester demands—rescheduling it to its next meeting on Monday. Following elections last year, no bloc was able to establish the majority necessary to put its nomination for premier to a vote. Instead, the parties agreed on an independent candidate with no base of his own—Abdel Mahdi.

A consensus choice, Abdel Mahdi lasted a year in the role before resigning in November after two months of unprecedented anti-government protests in the capital Baghdad and Shiite-majority south, marked by 460 killed and 25,000 injured. Despite his resignation, protests have continued in the face of brutal repression, killings and abductions, and a chilly winter.

Unyielding protesters

Several names for the premiership are still circulating hours before the expiration of the constitutional deadline. But all are insiders in a political system rejected in its entirety by protesters, who also oppose the growing influence of Iran, a powerbroker in Iraqi politics.

Outgoing higher education minister Qusay Al-Suhail has for several weeks been presented by officials as the candidate of Iran. A former key member of Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's movement, Suhail rejoined the State of Law Alliance of former prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki—close to Iran and enemy of Sadr—and seems to become the favorite for the premiership. But nothing is sure after weeks where each day a leading candidate ends up being dismissed. In Baghdad's Tahrir Square, posters display the rejected candidates with their faces crossed out in red.

On Wednesday, Mohammed Al-Soudani, a former minister and ex-governor, presented himself in Najaf to be endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani—longtime kingmaker in Iraqi politics. But he was rejected, according to sources in the Shiite shrine city. Wary of the anger on the street, the 89-year-old cleric, the highest religious authority for the majority of Iraqi Shiites, had already said he did not want to be involved in the formation of the new government.

11th hour asset

Several politicians told AFP that Saleh held a



NAJAF: An Iraqi protester poses in front of a graffiti amid ongoing anti-government demonstrations in the central city of Najaf on Wednesday. — AFP

card for the 11th hour: intelligence chief Moustafa Al-Kazemi, a shadowy figure seen as backed by the United States. On Wednesday, Fayeeg Al-Sheikh Ali—an outspoken liberal lawmaker who defends the right to drink alcohol and is critical of Iraq's endemic corruption—presented his own nomination to the president. Far from the party summits, the day before he had asked in a Twitter survey, “Should I submit my own candidacy?” to

which 73 percent of nearly 100,000 voters replied, “yes”. The security situation meanwhile has worsened, with recent rocket attacks on American bases. Ten security incidents in under two months have prompted the United States to send military reinforcements to the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, home to its embassy. US diplomatic staff have been reduced, with the consulate in Basra closed. — AFP

Sudanese celebrate, demand justice on uprising anniversary

KHARTOUM: Exuberant crowds took to the streets of Sudan yesterday to celebrate the first anniversary of the uprising that toppled veteran autocrat Omar al-Bashir and to demand justice for slain protesters. Thousands turned out in different districts of the capital Khartoum chanting slogans such as “we're revolutionaries, we'll finish our mission,” while motorists hung Sudanese flags from their cars. “We're proud of the revolution,” said Hani Hamed, surrounded by a sea of jubilant people. “Our celebration will not finish until we get justice for our martyrs,” echoed Nahla Mohamed. Many carried pictures of friends and relatives among the dozens of protesters killed during the uprising. In the town of Atbara, the cradle of the revolt, hundreds of people were expected to arrive by train from Khartoum to stay for a week of festivities.

Organized by the transitional government and the protest movement, it is a tribute to the thousands of demonstrators who travelled in the opposite direction to the capital at key moments during the uprising.

Hundreds of singing, dancing people crammed into two trains for the 350 kilometer (220 mile) journey from Khartoum to Atbara. “The revolution shall continue,” declared one banner carried by the protesters.

“Either we bring them justice or die like them,” read another alongside pictures of demonstrators who died. Limia Osman, 23, wearing a Sudanese flag over her shoulders like many of her fellow passengers, said she wanted to “say thank you” to the original protesters in Atbara. In Khartoum, celebrations are planned in several

districts, particularly at the city's Freedom Square, which was renamed in honor of the protesters. “I'll remember the first day of our protest under tear gas and live ammunition, which didn't stop us,” said Hana Hussein, 21. The army blocked roads leading to its Khartoum headquarters, where the protesters had staged a weeks-long sit-in outside to demand the end of military rule.

'Horrific crimes'

It was in the dusty streets of Atbara on the banks of the River Nile that Sudanese held their first rallies in December 2018 against a government decision to triple the price of bread. The protests swept across the African nation and by April, they had toppled Bashir, who had been in power for three decades. According to doctors linked to the protest movement, more than 250 people were killed in violence related to the demonstrations against Bashir and the military rulers who initially replaced him.

Amnesty International, which says at least 177 people were killed, yesterday called on Sudan's transitional authorities to honour their commitments to restore the rule of law and protect human rights. “The new Sudan authorities must ensure that members of the security forces who committed horrific crimes or used excessive force against protesters are held accountable in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty,” said Amnesty's Seif Magango. In August, after protracted talks with the military, protesters and activists won a deal to set up a transitional government and pave the way for civilian rule.

Former senior UN official Abdalla Hamdok, a veteran economist, was appointed transitional prime minister. Bashir, in prison since his overthrow, was sentenced on Saturday to two years' detention in a correctional centre for the elderly for corruption—the first of several cases against him. The charges stemmed from millions of dollars received by the toppled strongman from Saudi Arabia. In May, Sudan's attorney general said Bashir had been charged with the deaths of those killed during the uprising, without specifying when he would face trial. — AFP

Istanbul oppn mayor faces financial squeeze

ISTANBUL: At a half-built metro stop on the outskirts of Istanbul, the diggers have been idle for months, dozens of workers waiting day after day with nothing to do. The new 550-million-euro (\$610 million) metro line, started in 2016, was due to connect outlying suburbs on the Asian side of the city to the ferries and seaports in the center, but has been stalled as the municipality struggles to raise funding. There were already problems last year, when a currency crash and brief recession hit lenders.

But now the problem appears to be political. In March, Istanbul fell to the opposition—the first time that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's religious conservatives had lost power in the city in a quarter-century.

The new administration under Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP), claims Turkish state banks are refusing to finance major investment projects—and blame pressure from Erdogan's government in Ankara. “We have seen loans are not given even to fund our daily needs,” Imamoglu told reporters last month.

“I believe this is a result of the psychological impact of (the ruling party) losing its 25-year rule. I still have the faith that this stance and behavior will change.” Erdogan does not want Imamoglu to emulate the success he himself enjoyed as mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s, which propelled him to the leadership of the country, said Anthony Skinner of risk assessment firm Verisk Maplecroft. “By refusing to extend loans to the municipality, state banks—which provide approximately 40 percent of all loans and deposits in Turkey—are seeking to handicap Imamoglu and his team,” he told AFP. — AFP