



Russia cuts ties with NATO in latest row

Malala sends letter to Taliban after girls' school ban

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BAGHDAD: Iraqis pass by a poster of Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr in Sadr City in Baghdad, where the Sadrist movement has made remarkable progress. — AFP

Pro-Iran Hashed punished in Iraq vote

Voters desperate for economic recovery - not shows of military muscle

BAGHDAD: Iraq's election was a disaster for the pro-Iranian former paramilitary force Hashed Al-Shaabi, with voters desperate for an economic recovery rather than shows of military muscle. According to preliminary results the Conquest (Fatah) Alliance, the political arm of the multi-party Hashed, emerged with only around 15 MPs from the October 10 vote. In the last parliament it had 48, which made it the second largest bloc.

The big winner, with more than 70 seats according to the initial count, was the movement of Muqtada Sadr, a Shiite Muslim preacher who campaigned as a nationalist and critic of Iran. Hashed leaders have rejected the results as a "scam" and said they will appeal, ahead of a final tally expected in the next few weeks. Analysts say the results show that the mainly Shiite Hashed alliance has failed to live up to the political expectations of Iraqis after entering parliament for the first time in 2018, following their major role in defeating the Islamic State jihadist group.

Opposition activists accuse Hashed's armed groups - whose 160,000 fighters are now integrated into Iraq's state security forces - of being beholden to Iran and acting as an instrument of

oppression against critics. The Fatah MPs are also seen as having a lack of vision for economic development in an oil-rich country plagued by failing public services and endemic corruption - the very complaints behind a youth-led anti-government

protest movement that began two years ago and led to this month's elections.



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Maliki surprise

Unlike in the 2018 polls, Salwa, 22, said she did not vote for the alliance this time. "All they came up with were hollow slogans," said the student, who

did not give her last name. "My father insisted my mother and I vote for the Conquest," but Salwa opted for former prime minister Nuri Al-Maliki, who held the post between 2006 and 2014.

In the election's biggest surprise, Maliki, an ally of Hashed and a figure close to Iran, won more than 30 seats in the 329-seat parliament. For political scientist Ihsan Al-Shamari, the Hashed's weaponry was "a main cause" of its poor showing. Its close ties with Iran and several instances of "appearing to be above the state" have also damaged its popularity, according to Shamari. Since the October 2019 revolt, dozens of activists have been kidnapped or assassinated, and their movement blames the pro-Iranian camp.

'Country in free-fall'

Jalal Mohamed, a 45-year-old grocer, said he also did not vote for the Hashed. "The country is in free-fall, while their leaders live in the (high security) Green Zone" insulated from everyday life, he said. According to a source from within the pro-Iran camp, Hashed leaders have quarreled and blamed each other for the debacle over having rival candidates, thus fragmenting the vote. "The different

parties (in Hashed) tried to impose their own candidate in the same constituency and the votes were lost," said the source, on condition of anonymity.

Analysts say Sadr will have to come to terms with the Hashed alliance in the negotiating process to form a government and name the new prime minister. The Hashed is still expected to carry weight in parliament through the support of members who say they are independent, and arrangements with Maliki. Harith Hasan, a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center, puts Maliki's success down to running "strong candidates who resonated with the Shiite electorate, associating (him) with a strong Shiite state, rather than a state dominated by militias".

Maliki "attracted votes from social categories that benefited from his government's employment and patronage largesse when oil prices were at their highest," Hasan wrote in an analysis published by the Center. On Saturday, a coalition of Shiite parties to which the Hashed belongs took a harder line, blaming the electoral commission for "the failure of the electoral process" and warning against "the negative repercussions on the democratic path". — AFP

Kidnapping: Latest test for Haiti govt in turmoil

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Haiti's already fragile government faces a serious new crisis after one of the island nation's increasingly brazen criminal gangs kidnapped a large US and Canadian missionary group. There has been little official reaction in Haiti, and local police did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment. But civil groups called Sunday for the immediate release of the group of 17 missionaries, family members and staff abducted a day earlier while returning from an orphanage visit.

"We call for the liberation of the persons kidnapped, whether American citizens or of other nationalities," said Gedeon Jean, Director of the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights, based in the capital Port-au-Prince. He said the current situation was "detrimental to human dignity." The missionary group, including children and one Canadian, was traveling in several vehicles when stopped by members of a criminal gang some 30 kilometers east of the capital, a Haitian security source told AFP.

'Pray for us!'

One member of the group posted a desperate call for help in a WhatsApp group even as the attack unfolded. The Washington Post reported. "Please pray for us!!" the message read. "We are being held hostage, they kidnapped our driver. Pray pray pray. We don't know where they are taking us." The Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries said the group of 16 US citizens and one Canadian included five men, seven women and five children. "Join us in praying for those who are being held hostage, the kidnapers, and the families, friends, and churches of those affected," the group said in a statement. "Pray for those who are seeking God's direction and making decisions regarding this matter."

The abduction was the work of the so-called "400 Mawozo" gang, which for months has carried



PORT-AU-PRINCE: In this file photo, Haitians demonstrate in Port-au-Prince - demanding their right to life in the face of an upsurge in kidnappings perpetrated by gangs. — AFP

out kidnappings and robberies in the area between Port-au-Prince and the Dominican Republic border, said a Haitian security source, who spoke on grounds of anonymity. The gang has hijacked several vehicles - even entire busloads of victims - on roads it controls, kidnapping both Haitians and foreigners and holding them for ransoms often many times a Haitian's yearly earnings.

Such armed gangs have been steadily extending their reach, taking advantage of spreading insecurity and a political crisis aggravated by the assassination in July of President Jovenel Moise. "The police have proven incapable of confronting the gangs, which have become better organized and which control more and more territory" around the capital and in provincial cities, Gedeon Jean said. His group

has tallied an alarming increase in kidnappings in Haiti: more than 600 occurred in the first three months of 2021, up sharply from 231 in the corresponding period of 2020. The US State Department offered no details on the situation.

A spokesperson said only: "The welfare and safety of US citizens abroad is one of the highest priorities of the Department of State. We are aware of these reports and have nothing additional to offer at this time." Officials are typically close-mouthed about abductions, given the extraordinary sensitivity of such situations. The State Department had issued a "Level 4: Do Not Travel" advisory for Haiti in August due to "kidnapping, crime, civil unrest, and COVID-19." "Kidnapping is widespread and victims regularly include US citizens," the advisory warned. — AFP

Belarus expels French envoy

MOSCOW: France's ambassador to Belarus has left the country after the authorities in Minsk demanded he leave yesterday, the embassy said. The spokeswoman who made the announcement did not say why the Belarusian authorities told him to leave. But according to reports in the Belarusian media, the ambassador Nicolas de Lacoste was expelled because he never met President Alexander Lukashenko to give him copies of his credentials. Instead he gave them to Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, according to the French embassy. Lukashenko, according to reports in the Belarus media, took that as a snub.

"The Belarusian foreign ministry demanded that the ambassador leave before October 18," the embassy spokeswoman told AFP. "Ambassador Nicolas de Lacoste left Belarus today," she added. "He said goodbye to the staff of the embassy and recorded a video message to the Belarusian people, which will appear tomorrow morning on the embassy's website." France, like other EU countries, has not recognised Lukashenko claim to a sixth presidential term in disputed elections in August last year.

The European Union and the United States have imposed waves of sanctions on the Belarusian strongman's regime over a post-vote crackdown on dissent in Belarus after the country erupted in historic protests against his rule. But the 67-year-old leader, who has accused Western governments of having instigated the protests in the hope of fomenting a revolution, has so far withstood the penalties with the backing of ally and creditor Moscow. — AFP