

Religious authority and the 2018 parliamentary elections in Iraq

Kjetil Selvik



HYRES Research Note

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About the author

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HYRES – Hybrid Pathways to Resistance in the Islamic World

HYRES studies the interaction between Islamist movements and the state in the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Mali, and is designed to answer the following question: Why do some Islamist groups pursue their political and religious project within the state to which they belong – while other Islamist groups refuse to accept these borders, seeking instead to establish new polities, such as restoring the Islamic Caliphate?

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Introduction

This research brief analyzes the discursive production of, and political struggle over, religious authority in Shia Iraq.ⁱ It examines Friday sermons held in the run-up to the May 2018 parliamentary elections. Religious leaders have ways of generating authority, which lay politicians in a weak state lack. Above all, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani enjoys enormous prestige, which was tangible in the elections. During the campaign, candidates of all hues referred to him to gain legitimacy for their political projects. Sistani shied away from supporting specific candidates but issued a statement with general instructions for the elections and the country's politicians.

Lower-ranked religious leaders sought to connect with Sistani's authority. This brief shows how Muqtada al-Sadr and 'Ali al-Saghir fought over Sistani's words, stretching the Grand Ayatollah to their benefit. Sadr and Saghir are religious leaders, politicians and militia commanders, and were competitors in the election. Sadr did not run in person but oversaw the Sa'irun alliance, which gained more votes than any other electoral list. Saghir failed to win a seat for himself but campaigned on behalf of the al-Fatah-alliance, which became the second largest bloc in Parliament.

Friday sermons and authority production

Shia clerics have a prominent position in Iraq for multiple reasons. Historically, clerical authority increased when 17-18th century theologians introduced the *marja'iyya* institution in Shia Islam, which made it mandatory for believers to follow a religious scholar as their 'source of imitation' (*marja' al-taqlid*).ⁱⁱ The corresponding religious tax system generated rich financial resources for the clerics.ⁱⁱⁱ Shia Muslims constitute a majority in Iraq but were politically subordinate until 2003. Religious scholars played a prominent role in opposing the Ba'th regime from the late 1960s.^{iv} Iraq is home to two holy Shia cities, Najaf and Karbala', where millions of pilgrims convene every year.

Shia Islam does not have a formalized clerical hierarchy like the Catholic church.^v It is up to the believers to decide whom they recognize as their source of imitation. Religious leaders claim authority with reference to the knowledge they possess about the religion.^{vi} They build and finance schools, networks, charitable organizations and publicity channels to increase their reputation and esteem.^{vii} The production of religious authority also has a discursive side to it. Friday sermons are key in this respect, and resourceful clerics publish video footage of their speeches on their websites. This brief builds on the analysis of 10

sermons collected over the internet between 20 April - 10 May 2018, of which three from Sistani's representatives, three from the Sadr movement and four from Saghir.^{viii}

Friday sermons are a relatively recent phenomenon in Shia Islam, which Ayatollah Khomeini introduced in Iran. Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr brought the practice to Iraq in the 1990s. They consist of two parts: a theological dissemination that draws on the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and the Twelve Imams and a subsequent reflection on societal and political issues. The weightings of the two vary from preacher to preacher depending on theological orientation. Sistani keeps politics at an arm's length and makes the most of theological, moral and social issues while Sadr and Saghir go deeper into political debates.

When the clerics speak to legitimize their authority, their starting point is usually the doctrine of the Imamate. Sistani, Sadr and Saghir belong to the classical tradition of the Twelver Shi'a school, which views the Imam as infallible because they are sinless (*ma'sum*) and have the ability to see hidden reality (*al-ghayb*). The Imams know the inner, esoteric message of the Qur'an and have the task of guiding mankind. Without them, one will only have access to the letter of the holy book and not its spirit.^{ix}

The speakers in the analyzed Friday sermons elaborate on the Imam's inspiration and role, underscoring the guidance function. To give an example, Sistani's representative in the Karbala mosque, Sa'id Ahmad al-Safi, preaches about imam Zayn al-'Abdin who asks for God's help to "give him light" so that he can steer clear of temptations and lead the people out of darkness. He explains that believers lost direct access to the guide's light when the Twelfth Imam went into occultation, but that devotees who immerse themselves in religious knowledge can nonetheless come close to him. According to al-Safi, the religious scholars stand as intermediaries and carry on the guidance function in the Imam's absence:

"This is the way we have inherited from our Imams, God bless them, the way of the holy marja'iyya institution. (...) Until the Imam Mahdi's return, these people are his trustees".^x

According to Shia theology, the believer owes love, faithfulness, trust and obedience (*wilaya*) to the Imam. Devotion to the elect is at the heart of what it means to be a Shia Muslim. The Friday prayer leaders warn against losing respect for the religious authorities. "If I see a man flying between heaven and earth, but not believing in the marja'iyya, he is not

worth anything" says al-Safi.^{xi} Dhia al-Shawki who preaches on behalf of Muqtada al-Sadr, in the Kufa mosque, is equally candid:

"A very important question was raised to our eminence, the leader of Islam and the Muslims, Muqtada al-Sadr, God bless him. (...) The question: we are a group of worshipers in Sadr city and al-Amin where people with perverted thoughts and doctrines have been identified. A few weeks ago, they participated in the Friday prayer, but before and after the prayer, they spread poisonous thoughts among ordinary worshipers. (...) They said that there is no religious basis for imitating a mujtahid and even claimed that it is haram. (...) The answer [from al-Sadr]: boycott them and isolate them, but do not use violence. (...) Such people, if they insist on sinning, deserve prison and punishment for they are like plague that can destroy the body of society."^{xii}

In a similar vein, Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, who preaches in the Buratha mosque in Baghdad, underscores the necessity of religious guidance. Referring to Ayatollah Sistani's 2014 *fatwa* where he called on believers to defend the "country, people and the holy places"^{xiii} against ISIS, he explains:

"When your son, brother or other loved one suffers from an illness, and you know there are specialized doctors, what do you do? You seek the best doctor to find a treatment. So also when people seek guidance. They must choose the best, wisest and most knowledgeable guide to lead them."^{xiv}

In sum, the examples show how the clergy constructs a discursive hierarchy to legitimate its authority. At the bottom, the ordinary believer needs guidance, and, at the top, the Imam has divine qualities. In the middle stand the scholars with their own internal ladder. The "sources of imitation" (*maraja 'al-taqlid*) are closest to the apex and perpetuate the agency of the Imam. Applied in the context of Iraqi elections, I will show what messages Sistani, Sadr and Saghir used their religious prestige to convey.

Sistani's electoral message

In his 4 May 2018 Friday sermon from the Imam Husayn shrine in Karbala, Sistani representative 'Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i read an official statement (*bayan*) from the Grand Ayatollah on the fast approaching elections. "Since the fall of the former authoritarian regime," the statement says, "the religious authority has been working to replace it with a system based on pluralism and peaceful power changes through free and fair elections, convinced that there is no

alternative to this form of government in this country”.^{xv} Sistani explains that he remains committed to this line of thought but that elections must meet certain preconditions to give satisfactory results. He points a finger at Iraqi politicians:

"the misconceptions and disappointments that have followed previous elections as a result of abuse of power (...) corruption and waste of public funds (...) with privileges as high wages and bonuses (...) were the result of not meeting the necessary preconditions ”.^{xvi}

Sistani's solution for solving the problems can be summed up in the word reform. The entire sermon ahead of the official statement is devoted to this theme. Al-Karbala'i lectures on how the Prophet and the Imams worked to improve their societies. The very essence of their movements was, he claims, reform. The Friday prayer leader lists three criteria for success. First, a complementary reform program for all aspects of life, which the listeners understands resides in Islam. Second, leadership, where the prayer leader emphasizes that Sistani takes responsibility and "follows the movements of society in all areas (...) prescribes the right program when he is at risk or danger".^{xvii} Third, society's responsiveness to reformist leaders.

The Grand Ayatollah stands in a pragmatic theological tradition that esteems that the clergy should adjust its political involvement to the political and social circumstances.^{xviii} Since the 2003 US-led occupation, he has worked to strengthen the foundations of the Iraqi state.^{xix} The marja' lent his support to the 2005 Iraqi constitution knowing that a Shia-Islamic state in a multi-religious country was unrealistic and that the Shias as majority were assured influence in an election-based system.^{xx} He regarded militant Islamist groups fighting Western occupation with skepticism because their loyalty to Najaf's traditional leadership was in doubt.^{xxi} Sistani considers the Iraqi state as a necessary buffer to Iran's theological and political influence. He has been a supporter of democracy and national reconciliation throughout.^{xxii}

Sistani's position on the 2018 elections can be read as the continuation of this state-building project. He is trying to secure political stability by demanding politicians respect the law and put their weight behind the fight against corruption. Sistani is careful not to comment on political issues or give instruction to voters. He emphasizes that citizens have the right to vote as they wish and abstain from calling voting a duty. The statement stresses that the marja' "is independent of all candidates and electoral lists and that the voters themselves have to consider what they stand for". It ends with a warning to politicians not to abuse his

name for their own gain: "No person or organization must exploit the cloak of the religious authority that has a special place in the heart of the Iraqi people, to score points in the election".^{xxiii} Perhaps the warning was in truth a sigh, because the politicians were already fighting over political message. Let us consider the example of how the Sadr movement and Saghira, a representative of the rival al-Fatah alliance, tore and teared in the Grand Ayatollah's mantle.

Sadr's radical challenge

The Sadr movement has historically had a tense relationship with Sistani. Muqtada al-Sadr's father in law, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, were both supporters of an activist Shi'a Islam, while Sistani belonged to Ayatollah Abu-l Qasim al-Khu'i's school, which they condescendingly referred to as 'the silent hawza' (*al-hawza al-samit*). When Muqtada al-Sadr built his militia Jaysh al-mahdi to fight the US occupation, it was also opposed to Najaf and the 'sleeping' Sistani. The relationship with the Grand Ayatollah has gradually improved because of civil war, anti-shia campaigns, Iran's influence and Muqtada's own development. Still, Sadr's position is ambivalent. For example, Muqtada's Friday prayer leaders do not explicitly pray for Sistani; they pray for Muhammad Sadiq and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. They do not refer to Sistani in religious matters; they read from Muqtada's own fatwas. Muqtada refers to his father Muhammad Sadiq as marja', although many believe it is forbidden to emulate a dead person. But election time is election time, and Muqtada understands the benefit of connecting with Sistani's popularity.

Sadr's 2018 campaign strategy was to mobilize on popular dissatisfaction with the politician class and present an 'Iraq first' alternative to the ambitions of Iran. He entered an electoral alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party and promised a 'technocratic government' to reach beyond his traditional constituency. He ran a merciless campaign against corruption in the political establishment and posed as the people's voice. Stories about the prophets and the Imam's struggle against social injustice figured prominently in the analyzed Friday sermons. For example, Hadi al-Daninalwi in the Kufa Mosque relates about the Prophet Joseph who had abdominal pain because he abstained from eating:

"They asked, what is your pain? He said: the body wants me to fill it up, but I keep it hungry. They asked: how many years has it been hungry? He said: seven years (...) I fear, on the day of judgment, that Allah will say, Joseph, why are you full while your people sleep hungry?"

O Prime Minister, o Speaker of Parliament, o Vice Presidents, o gluttons, you know how many souls sleep hungry, and yet you run for office again?"^{xxiv}

Muqtada al-Sadr picked up an expression attributed to Sistani, stating that "the one who has been tried cannot be tried again" (*al-mujarrab la yujarrab*). It is said to have originated in a speech held by Sistani's representative Ahmad al-Safi in 2013 where he warned against the appointment of ministers who had failed to serve the people in the past.^{xxv} Sadr incorporated the expression in his electoral campaign, combining it with the Iraqi dialect slogan "tear them all up with the root!" (*shal'a qala'*). He portrayed it as if the marja' was opposed to electing anyone who had previously held a seat in parliament. Sadr thus borrowed Ayatollah's religious cover for a populist program that rejected the established political class in its entirety. In his sermon on the day before the election, Sadr-preacher Hadi al-Daninalwi quotes a 'fatwa' from his religious leader on how the people should vote. Muqtada al-Sadr admonishes that "Najaf's venerable sons are the venerable marja's sons which means that their motto is 'the one who has been tried cannot be tried again'."^{xxvi} The preacher elaborates:

"Today's Iraqi citizens either follow the order of the marja' or religious leadership (...) and both have banned the choice of despised persons who have brought shame and evil to Iraq, stolen all its goods and resources, filled their stomachs and their pockets with money, transferred all its bank reserves abroad. Last Friday, the marja' called the people to participate in the election and asked it not to elect these criminals again, not to elect those who have been tried and to oppose external meddling in the election"^{xxvii}

Without saying so directly, the sadrists were taking aim at the Da'wa Party, which has dominated Iraqi politics since 2005. The reference to "external meddling" was moreover a strike of their opponents in the al-Fatah alliance, which was seen as having close ties with Iran. The al-Fatah alliance consisted of militia leaders from the popular mobilization forces (*al-hashd al-sha'bi*) with sympathy for Iran's Leader 'Ali Khamene'i. I will show how a candidate of the alliance replied.

Saghir's counter-attack

Jalal al-Din al-Saghir preaches in the al-Buratha mosque in Baghdad where the first Shia Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, is said to have stopped in 657 on his way to the legendary battle of Siffin. Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim (1889–1970) made his father Ayatollah 'Ali al-Saghir custodian of the mosque. Jalal al-Din was a founding member of the High

Islamic Council of Iraq (ISCI in English), which he has represented in parliament. He formed the Followers of the faith brigade (*saraya ansar al-'aqida*) in 2014 as part of the popular mobilization forces that fought the Islamic State group.

Saghir has previously spoken highly about Iran's Leader.^{xxviii} However, Khamene'i is no selling point in Iraqi elections, and in the here analyzed sermons, Saghir does not mention his name. Instead, he focuses on Sistani, referring to him as "the Imam over all Imams, our marja' for whom we will sacrifice our lives".^{xxix} Saghir throws himself into the controversy surrounding the expression *al-mujarrab la yujarrab*, throwing a rhetorical question at Sadr: "The Prophet has been tried and the Imams have been tried - shall we also say we do not want them?".^{xxx} He asks if people want a national assembly of 'dancers and singers', 'clowns' and 'light-headed fools'. In Saghir's interpretation, the idea of replacing all experienced politicians is a US and Baathist conspiracy that will make Iraq an easy prey for the enemy:

"One of the plots is to make the next parliament mindless, without expertise and knowledge, under the pretext of bringing in new faces."^{xxxi}

The day before the election, Saghir praises the volunteers in the popular mobilization forces. Had it not been for them and the Grand Ayatollah's determination, Iraq would have fallen to the enemy, he reminds the audience. He warns against believing that the danger is over:

"Do you think those who mobilized IS would say sorry, I regret, and never do it again? Really nice people, right? Snakes give birth to snakes and scorpions only give birth to scorpions."^{xxxii}

Saghir concludes that Iraq must continue to have security as its number one priority and allocate more funds to the popular mobilization forces. He leans on Sistani to support this claim. However, there are good reasons to believe that the marja' was uncomfortable with serving as the al-Fatah alliance's cover. After declaring the 2014 fatwa, Sistani's representatives stressed that it was intended to increase recruitment to the Iraqi security forces and not to legitimize paramilitary groups. They have refused to use the term *al-hashd* in silent protest against the militia leaders deviation of the marja's authority.^{xxxiii} Now that the war is formally over, Sistani wants the popular mobilization forces to be subject to the authority of the Ministry of Defense or Interior. Khamene'i-loyal militias are against and meet criticism of their resistance with the claim illustrated above that the enemy continues to lurk. Neither Sistani

nor the Iraqi government have the military might or autonomy to force the paramilitary groups to surrender their weapons.

Conclusion

Religious authority is political currency in Iraq. I have analyzed the discursive strategy of select Shia scholars, arguing that they portray their agency as the extension of the will of the Imam. Sistani, Sadr and Saghir spent their capital differently in the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. Grand Ayatollah Sistani promoted reform of the state, hoping it would help preserve a system and a relative stability that his interests are tied up with. Sadr and Saghir tapped into the marja's authority but campaigned on agendas that differed from his. Sadr promoted a radical form of anti-elitism, which from Najaf's conservative standpoint risks fomenting unrest. Although Sistani expressed support for the popular protests that spread in southern Iraq after the election, he continues to fear street politics. Saghir used Sistani to legitimize the existence of paramilitary groups that feed on and reinforce the state's security deficit. Despite their Shia-Muslim religious superstructure, the groups often do not answer to Sistani.

Sistani is a unifying figure that has helped save the Iraqi state structure. However, his attempt to guide the political process from a distance, using religious authority, is a challenging task. No one has a monopoly over the interpretation of Islam and identity politics takes on its own and unpredictable dynamics. In the analyzed case, Sadr's rebellious rhetoric and the reinforcement of paramilitary groups make indirect use of the same religious authority. It creates challenges for consolidating central government that may threaten Iraq's stability in the long term. The marja's dilemma is that he cannot counter the actors who use him for political purposes without being caught up in the logic of politics. Sistani's popularity is inversely proportional to the state's. He cannot become a politician if that is to last. For Iraq, the question is what happens when the 88-year-old is reunited with his Creator. Sistani's death will weaken the defense against intra-Shia conflict.

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- ⁱ The brief is a shortened version of an article published in the Nordic Journal of Middle East Studies, see Kjetil Selvik, "Religiøs autoritet og tynnslett stat: valgkamp i sjia-Irak", *Babylon*, 2 (2018) <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/ba.6726>.
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- ^{xii} Dhia al-Shawki, 27. april 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIP8Z5YFLaE,00:45-02:46>.
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- ^{xiv} Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, 20. april 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5AXX7rfQX4,25:00-25:41>.
- ^{xv} 'Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, 4. mai 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPSxedqd4f4,29:51-30:32>.
- ^{xvi} Ibid. 34:02–34:59.
- ^{xvii} Ibid. 19:54–20:15.
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- ^{xxiii} Ibid. 38:00–38:24.
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^{xxv} Ahmad Odezadeh, «'Al-Mujarrab La-Yujarrab'», åpnet 10. september 2018,

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^{xxxii} Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, 11. mai 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vi6o5K8XiAY>, 05:07–05:22.

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HYRES studies the interaction between Islamist movements and the state in the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Mali, and is designed to answer the following question: Why do some Islamist groups pursue their political and religious project within the state to which they belong – while other Islamist groups refuse to accept these borders, seeking instead to establish new polities, such as restoring the Islamic Caliphate?

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