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Abdul Aziz al-Hakim died aged 60 after suffering from cancer Top Iraqi Shiite leader dies as successor eyed



Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, in Baghdad (File)

BAGHDAD (Agencies)

The leader of one of Iraq's most powerful Shiite Muslim political groups and most important religious dynasties died on Wednesday after a long battle with cancer, Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer, his party's parliamentary leader, said.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim -- formerly a heavy smoker -- had undergone frequent medical check-ups in Tehran and even visited the United States to see lung cancer specialists but died today in an Iranian hospital aged 60.

"He died a few minutes ago after battling cancer for 28 months," his son Mohsen Hakim told AFP. He and his brother Ammar had been at their father's bedside.

Hakim, a cleric who helped establish an opposition movement in exile in Iran in 1982 to battle Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime, returned to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003.

Hakim headed the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (ISCI) after his brother, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqer al-Hakim, was killed in a car bomb. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's son, Ammar, is expected to next lead ISCI.

The overtly religious party became a major political player in majority Shiite Iraq and its role in the Iraqi government was backed by the United States.

It was founded in neighboring Shiite Iran, where many of its senior leaders lived for years in exile during Saddam's rule.

Political uncertainty

Hakim added to political uncertainty ahead of national polls in January and at a time when Iraq has seen a series of devastating bombings.

ISCI is part of Iraq's ruling Shiite alliance, which also includes Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa party, but ISCI announced this week it would lead a new group to compete in January's polls without Maliki.

Although ISCI lost ground to Maliki's Dawa in provincial elections last January, the well-organized and well-funded party wields major clout and will be a formidable competitor in January.

ISCI has several members in top ministerial posts, and has influence in Iraq's security forces, which include members of ISCI's armed affiliate, the Badr Organization.

ISCI derives much of its support from the Hakim family name, revered among Shiites for its lineage of scholars and sacrifice in the face of persecution by Saddam's Sunni-led regime.