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Iraq Is Spinning Its Wheels, But in the Right Direction

Summary

- The political situation in Baghdad is still blocked almost four months after the national elections signaled change while denying any one of the four main coalitions a clear mandate to govern.
- The complications are real, but so too is a political culture that is increasingly appealing to democratic norms and factors to sort out the difficulties.

Baghdad this month, and likely for several more, is engaged in the political equivalent of Sumo wrestling. After appeals and recounts, the now-certified results of the March elections show the "Iraqiya" slate got 91 seats in parliament; "State of Law" got 89.

Each of their heavyweights, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and current Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki respectively, claims the right to form a government and act as prime minister. The parliament has 325 seats; 163 constitute a majority.

In his visit over the July 4 weekend, Vice President Biden tried to referee the match, with the objective of getting the two to stop wrestling and join together to form the new government, a formula Washington prefers.

The Details are Complicated

Allawi bases his claim to the prime ministry on the election results, which include his narrow lead in parliamentary seats and a massive vote for change, as 80 percent of the previous parliamentarians lost their seats. Why shouldn't Iraq learn that alternation in power is part of the democratic game? How can Iraq be a democracy if the same prime minister is installed, with more or less the same majority coalition, despite such a dramatic vote for change? Why should voters bother to go to the polls in the future if their votes don't have an impact? How can Iraq remain a democracy if Maliki continues to strengthen his hold on the security forces and other levers of power?

Meanwhile, Maliki bases his claim on his post-electoral agreement with the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), which gained 70 seats, making his the largest bloc in parliament with 159 seats, just four short of the numerical majority. Maliki also points to his more than 600,000 votes won in Baghdad, making him the largest single vote-getter in the country. With all the problems Iraq faces, why cause further delay by allowing a group like Iraqiya form a government with only 91 seats in parliament? If the Americans want to get out of Iraq on their set timetable and leave it in relatively stable condition, isn't it best to keep Maliki in place? Who better to face down the Iranians than a Shia prime minister who is not in their pocket?

“The emerging Iraq is starting to look like other parliamentary democracies, measuring itself with democratic yardsticks, with internal sectarian and ethnic frictions still strong but being worked out through politics, and with neighbors who won't leave it alone. This is far from the Bush administration's beacon of democracy, but it may be something the Obama administration will be able to call a foreign policy success come November 2012.”

Both men face problems. Maliki's post-electoral alliance looks shaky. The Iraqi National Alliance has not agreed to name him as its candidate for prime minister. But Maliki remains in the prime minister's chair for the moment with the advantages of incumbency and no parliament to provide oversight until the difficult business of installing a new prime minister is completed. Allawi asserts that the constitution requires formation of a government within 30 days of the convening of parliament on June 14, but Maliki rejects this claim, and many such deadlines have been ignored in Iraq.

Widen the aperture a bit and things get more complicated. It is generally assumed that the speaker of parliament, the president and the prime minister will be elected as a pre-agreed "package"; the president has to be elected by two-thirds, or 217 votes, but only on the first ballot. The Kurds—determined to remain together as a bloc—can provide that margin. But they don't like some of the people in Allawi's slate, and they don't like Maliki. And they know that either one—or some third choice—will have to bring them into the parliamentary majority, so they have no need to rush to choose sides.

Widening the aperture a bit more: Allawi has support from Iraq's Arab neighbors and Turkey for his mostly Sunni slate; Iran supports the overwhelmingly Shia Iraqi National Alliance and has pressured Maliki into the post-electoral agreement with it. But Tehran does not much like Maliki, who led the Iraqi security forces in their successful fight against Moqtada al Sadr, the Iranian-influenced (if not controlled) leader of the biggest part of the Iraqi National Alliance. Yet, neither Allawi nor Maliki can govern effectively without Sunni support, most of which is to be found in Allawi's group.

Although not official policy, many Americans who follow Iraq prefer Allawi, as he is secular (if Shia) and would reflect the electoral victory for "change," but they would be glad to see Maliki and Allawi govern together, especially if it meant marginalizing the more extreme parts of the Shia Islamist Iraqi National Alliance and its Iranian backers. But no one can figure out how to give both of them jobs they would take.

Both want to be prime minister. Neither Maliki nor Allawi wants the presidency, to which the Kurds have laid claim (for incumbent Jalal Talabani); it loses its veto power in the next parliament and is therefore weakened. Neither Maliki nor Allawi will take the speaker's job, which is more important than the presidency but less important than the prime ministry. Maliki insists on the prime minister's job for himself. Allawi accepts the notion that someone other than himself might be prime minister, so long as it is not Maliki or someone from Maliki's Dawa Party. Adel Abdul Mahdi, a current vice president from the junior partner in the National Iraqi Alliance, is the current odds on favorite. Ibrahim Jaffari, a former prime minister, is also a contender, one with support from the Sadrists.

Beyond the Details, a Clearer Picture Emerges

Beyond the details lies irony: everyone knows, more or less, what the eventual government will look like. Come fall, Iraq will most likely have a broad coalition government, that will likely include at least three if not four of the main political alliances, as well as several smaller ones. Everyone agrees that no government can be formed without substantial Sunni, Shia and Kurdish participation.

Whatever government emerges is unlikely to have a coherent program, beyond a commitment to democracy, prosperity, the fight against corruption and other eternal verities. No smaller, more compact and coherent government will be able to get the 217 votes (needed to elect a president on the first ballot) or include Sunni, Shia and Kurds. The parliamentary opposition will be weak and ineffective, while the majority will be large and likely ineffective.

The main issue is not the eventual outcome, which like December's climate is more predictable than tomorrow's weather. The issue is the same one that dominates a junior high school dance: "who leads?"

"Negotiations" occur every day in Baghdad, where there is an endless round of meetings as Al-lawi and Maliki try to chip away at the other's voting bloc or win the Kurds over, or get the Iranians, Americans, Arabs or Turks to exert some pressure here or there. But it all looks suspiciously like spinning wheels—no one is likely to get much traction for the next month or so. Then, from about August 12 to September 12, Ramadan plus a few days of Eid will disrupt the process, if it is still going on. It will likely be fall before a broad, weak government emerges from this commotion.

The Right Direction

What does all this tell us about Iraq's fledgling democracy?

First, it looks much like other parliamentary democracies with fragmented electorates. Even in highly developed democracies, something like these seemingly endless rounds of negotiations over government formation might easily take months. The Dutch and Italians, however, have decades of practice behind them. The Iraqis are doing this for only the second time since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Second, many of the appeals the Iraqis are making—to the number of votes, the number of seats, this constitutional provision, that constitutional provision, opinions of the courts and of the electoral commission, pacts among the political coalitions—are notably democratic or at least institutional measuring sticks, which many of them would not have used five years ago. After all, at that time, the Sunnis had boycotted the elections and demanded revision of the constitution. While many still want constitutional amendments, this time they were very much part of the electoral process.

Third, the Iraqi electorate in both the March elections and the previous provincial elections in January 2009 shifted away from established sectarian and ethnic parties, but ethnicity and sect are still powerful forces in Iraqi politics. The most important factors altering the results from five years earlier were the fact that Sunnis voted and the fact that the Shia were not united, but the Sunnis voted heavily for Allawi's list, while Shia voted heavily for Maliki's as well as the Iraqi National Alliance, which are now allied. This is certainly identity politics. Then again, identity politics is a lot better than civil war, which still cannot be ruled out. It is also, ironically, a barrier to dictatorship: where would a born-again Saddam Hussein find the unified security forces required to impose his will on the entire country?

Fourth, external forces are still buffeting Iraq's politics, threatening to make the country a battlefield for broader Sunni/Shia and Arab/Kurdish/Turkish confrontations. The U.S., oddly, is among the least felt and least resented of the external forces: Shia and Sunni both want American protection from each other, as do the Kurds from the Arabs. The Americans are, however, focused mainly on completing their drawdown to 50,000 troops by September 1. U.S. troops are less and less visible (and more and more appreciated).

What Does This Mean for the United States?

Americans in general and the Obama administration in particular are determined to keep to the drawdown schedule. Nothing happening on the Iraqi political scene seems likely to endanger that goal. The horrific acts of violence that occur on a more or less weekly basis are not having the political impact that they did three years ago, largely because all the major groups have joined the political process and are determined to counter the violence.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Daniel Serwer is vice president for Centers of Innovation at the United States Institute of Peace. These views, based on talks with dozens of Iraqi politicians in Baghdad during June 2010, are his own.

The tougher question is about continuing the drawdown once the new government is in place. Current agreements call for all American forces to completely depart Iraq by the end of 2011, but it is widely assumed in both the U.S. and Iraq that the next government will want major military assistance, if only because the Iraqi navy and air force are still in a rudimentary state. Asking for such assistance and approving the agreement will be difficult for whoever is in power in Baghdad. This will be all the more difficult if the Sadrists have a weighty role in the next government.

How weighty is still unclear, but the Americans are more than likely going to find Moqtada al Sadr's people in the next government rather than outside it. The Sadrists played a smart electoral game and won the lion's share of the INA votes in parliament. They will want to reap some rewards. Across the political spectrum, the Iraqi political leadership agrees that it is better having them in the tent than outside it. The Americans will need to come to terms with the Sadrists' return to government, where they have previously shown a penchant to use state resources and services to strengthen their political base. But what else is new in politics?

More generally, the important question for the U.S. is whether the next Iraqi government will be under heavy Iranian influence. A government that emerges out of an Iraqiya/Maliki alliance or an Iraqiya/INA alliance is more likely to resist Iranian influence than one emerging out of a Maliki/INA alliance, which is essentially an all-Shia coalition backed by Iran. In other words, Washington has a real interest in keeping Iraqiya in a lead role, an interest that is best pursued quietly but firmly.

So there it is: the emerging Iraq is starting to look like other parliamentary democracies, measuring itself with democratic yardsticks, with internal sectarian and ethnic frictions still strong but being worked out through politics, and with neighbors who won't leave it alone. This is far from the Bush administration's beacon of democracy, but it may be something the Obama administration will be able to call a foreign policy success come November 2012., provided the security situation holds.



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