



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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Who Won Iraq's Elections?

Rachel Kantz Feder

Nine months after Iraq's March 2010 parliamentary elections, former Prime Minister Ayad al-'Allawi conceded the premiership to incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Parliamentary approval of Maliki's national unity government on December 21 means that Iraqis are no longer deprived of an operating government, at least officially. In recent months, analysts have crowned Iran as the real victor of the elections. In their view, Tehran's overt machinations before and after the vote constituted definitive proof of Iranian hegemony in Iraq. However, just as declarations regarding the end of the political impasse should be regarded with caution, so too should claims of Iran's victory.

Nearly ten months of post-election negotiations produced a configuration in which Maliki's "State of Law" bloc and 'Allawi's "'Iraqiya" dominate the national partnership government, the largest government in Iraqi history. Maliki retained his position and his political bloc will occupy influential ministries and deputyships. 'Iraqiya attained the influential post of speakers of parliament and numerous portfolios, with 'Allawi scheduled to head the new National Council of Strategic Policies. Somewhat surprisingly, the putative kingmakers of the unity government, the Kurds and the ascendant followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, are underrepresented. Kurdish leaders, already ensconced in the largely autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in the north, retained the presidency and foreign ministry and obtained a few modestly powerful portfolios. Presently, it appears as though Sadrists would be excluded from security ministries, but will head a proposed bylaw committee, occupy two ministries, and fill important governorships in the south. Maliki's management of the souk-like scramble for influence was reasonably skillful. Nonetheless,

mitigating intense animosities and maneuvering between his coalition partners' discordant agendas cannot be achieved through the creation of superfluous government positions. There are numerous thorny issues that are sure to test the tenuous partnership and impede efforts to forge genuine national reconciliation.

For example, from its inception, 'Allawi's new Council—his compensation for capitulating to Maliki—has been mired in controversy over its purview. Unsupported by legal force, the Council's decisions will constitute no more than ruminations, and its lack of real authority could re-ignite power struggles. On the Kurdish front, Mas'ud Barzani, who for the first time officially presented the right of self-determination to his party's congress for a vote, expects Maliki to acquiesce to some Kurdish demands. Thus, it may be more difficult for Maliki to skirt progress on both a hydrocarbon law that will regulate oil and gas contracts and the status of Kirkuk and other territories disputed by the Kurds.

The ongoing controversy surrounding de-Ba'thification is potentially another source of instability, which was underscored by 'Iraqiya's walkout from the mid-November parliament session. 'Iraqiya politicians protested lawmakers' refusal to reverse the barring of three Sunni politicians, who were later reinstated. However, the government has yet to rescind legal barriers that preclude a comprehensive solution to this problem, which has left thousands of Iraqis unemployed. Overall, given the fundamental divergences between Maliki's coalition partners on pressing issues, further impasses are likely.

For all the talk about "an Iranian occupation of Iraq," Iran's purported spoils are hardly impressive. Iran strove to frustrate the national unity government that has coalesced, and instead promoted an all-Shi'i alliance of Islamist parties that would thwart Kurdish demands, ensure a weak Ba'th-free government and help Tehran extend its influence in the region. Thus, Kurdish power-brokering, and particularly the resolute efforts to keep 'Allawi's Sunni factions in the fold, were not in line with Iranian interests. In response, Tehran launched a smear campaign against Kurdish leaders.

For Iran, Maliki's triumph over 'Allawi averted a major setback, but other aspects of the government's composition are probably disappointing. For instance, Maliki replaced the powerful Speaker of Parliament—whose intimate ties to Iran were well known—with Usama al-Nujayfi, who is suspected of alleged Ba'thist sympathies.

Similarly, the recent nullification of Iraqi President Jalal al-Talabani's veto power, and the slated southern governorship appointments of Sadrists who vehemently reject the idea of a loose decentralized state, are not to Iran's liking. Furthermore, the elections revealed that Iran's historic protégés, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Badr Corps, have dwindling constituencies. Consequently, they are also underrepresented in the new government.

This is not to suggest that developments have been categorically negative for Tehran. The pre-election disqualification of certain candidates—widely believed to have been carried out at Iran's behest—certainly worked in its favor. In another instance, which went largely unnoticed, the process meant to rectify de-Ba'athification was halted in a southern governorate. Also, the national census, which is high on Iraqi Kurdish leaders' agenda and is so perturbing to Iran due to its potential ramifications for its own Kurdish minority, was delayed recently for a third time.

Analysts are generally quick to ascribe developments that are consonant with Tehran's interests to Iranian orchestration. Iranian intervention should not be discounted, but neither should the other forces at play. In 2008, the Americans—not the Iranians—established the commission that implemented the pre-election de-Ba'athification measures. More importantly, many Iraqis genuinely fear the return of Ba'ath power, and politicians identify the benefits in continued de-Ba'athification. During the political deadlock, members of the security forces even assassinated a number of their colleagues suspected of participating in planning Ba'athist coups. As for the national census, opposition goes far beyond Iranian objections. Although a census is imperative to the improvement of state services and the development of infrastructure, many Iraqi politicians who want to evade Kurdish demands to resolve the status of disputed territories and reverse Saddam's Arabization policies are threatened by the likely results.

Through a constellation of sophisticated channels, Iran unquestionably exercises immense influence in post-Saddam Iraq—both soft and, arguably, hard power. Yet, the elections have also exposed the distinct limitations on this influence. Shi'i fragmentation and the unifying nationalist force of the religious establishment under Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani are factors that partially explain these constraints.

Shi'i infighting has been pervasive in post-Saddam Iraq, beginning with the Sadrist murder of Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei and the affronts to Grand Ayatollahs Sistani

and Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim in 2003. Maliki's confrontation with Muqtada al-Sadr's army in 2008, which was lauded as an expression of an Iraq-first identity by the Maliki-led government, is another salient example of intra-Shi'i strife. In addition to their various socio-economic, theological, and regional identities, Shi'is have been divided over their relations with Iran and the US presence in Iraq. Iran has attempted to bridge these internecine chasms and meld Shi'i parties together in an umbrella organization, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). Before the 2009 provincial elections, Maliki, who has a history of acrimonious relations with Iran, defected from the INA, recast himself as a secular nationalist, and established the State of Law coalition. Despite its assiduous efforts, Iran failed to reunite Maliki, the Sadrists, the Fadhilah Party, ISCI and the Badr Corps for the 2010 elections.

Sadr's begrudging support of Maliki's premiership undoubtedly marked an Iranian achievement. However, analysts who defined Sadr's turnabout as a resounding victory neglected the significance of a subsequent development. Heavyweight ISCI leaders absented themselves from the Shi'i INA meeting convened to officially confirm its support for Maliki's nomination. Instead, they met with 'Allawi, signaling the potential formation of a rival alliance. Thus, while Iran secured the compliance of one Shi'i actor, it lost that of others, notwithstanding its alleged extensive financial support to them.

Najaf's religious establishment under the stewardship of Sistani serves as another powerful counterweight to Iranian influence. Sistani has consistently acted as a unifying force, intervening in the political and state-building processes at critical moments in order to promote an inclusive and democratic orientation for Iraq. To Iran's chagrin, Sistani has supported the state's monopoly of power, condemned the failure to build security forces on a national basis, and inveighed against constitutional procedures that entrench sectarian and ethnic divisions. When parliamentarians mulled over a new electoral law, Sistani persuaded politicians to adopt an open-list system, in contrast to the closed system that Iran favored due to its perpetuation of sectarian-based voting. He figures prominently in WikiLeaks cables for his commitment to foiling Iranian designs, allegedly even refusing Iranian student enrollment in the *hawzas* (Shi'i religious seminaries) for fear of Iranian intelligence infiltration.

The limitations on Tehran's reach also derive from Iraqis' (and not just non-Shi'is') unfavorable views of Iran. A recent Princeton-commissioned poll revealed that Iraqis

are tired of foreign meddling and aspire to genuine political independence for their country. Attentive to this mood, and sensitive to the notion that Iraq is undergoing a process of "Lebanonization," politicians have revved up their nationalist rhetoric. In an interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Nov. 21), President Talabani asserted that Iraqi Shi'is are "proud of their independence," view themselves as "original Shi'is of the world" and "purebred Arabs," and see Najaf as "the original homeland of Shi'is." He also emphasized Iraq's enduring alliance with Iran's American adversary.

Although politics in post-Saddam Iraq are shaped by a complicated mix of internal and external factors, current conditions demonstrate that the political process is ultimately determined by Iraqi actors and interests. The fact it took nine months to form a government notwithstanding the fact that both Tehran and Washington favored Maliki's premiership speaks for itself. Tehran may wield considerable, and rising influence but it cannot engineer a Shi'i client government. Evidently, Iran did not "win" the elections: the winners are yet to be determined.

Rachel Kantz Feder, a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University, works under the auspices of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

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