Report

Al-Maliki Looks at a Third Term in Iraq

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An Iraqi woman walks past an anti-terrorism banner with a photo of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in Baghdad, Iraq. [AP Photo/Karim Kadim]

Abstract

Amidst continuing violence, political instability and socioeconomic insecurity, Iraq stands at a crossroad with the next national elections scheduled for April 30, 2014. This will be the first legislative poll since the American withdrawal from the country in December 2011, and the third since the end of Saddam Hussein's rule. These elections should have a crucial influence over the course of Iraq's still fragile reconstruction, which will be the top priority for any new government over its four-year term. Incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, first sworn in 2006, is seeking a third mandate despite his unpopularity and growing political opposition, including from other Shiite forces and within his own party. Al-Maliki's chances to retain power are real, however, owing to the overall fragmentation of Iraqi politics, his maneuvers to diminish his rivals and consistent support from Iran as well as the United States. After a decade of occupation, Iraq could be heading toward another authoritarian regime.

A challenging new election

Over the past decade, three national elections have been held in Iraq aimed at building a democracy out of the ruins of the former Baathist system. The first elections took place on January 30, 2005, to form a 275-seat transitional assembly mandated to write a constitution, approved on October 15, 2005, by a referendum. The second elections occurred on December 15, 2005, designed to elect a permanent parliament and were

followed on March 7, 2010, by the last parliamentary polls held under American occupation (1). Similar to these earlier rounds of voting, the April 30 elections, in which more than 9,000 candidates belonging to 142 different parties are to compete for 328 seats, will take place in a context of violence marked by an unprecedented multiplication of suicide bombings and armed attacks (2). In a recent press release, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq reported a total of 592 Iraqis killed and another 1,234 injured for the sole month of March (3). Such security deterioration raises concerns as to expected voter turnout and the legitimacy of elections that are unpopular among most Iraqis, disillusioned by the state of security, unemployment, lack of public services and political corruption.

The decline of the large cross-communal coalitions that had characterised previous elections has gone hand in hand with an increasing number of conflicts and greater fragmentation of the political landscape, allowing for smaller entities to run for office and providing the Iraqi population with more electoral choice (4). In addition to the rivalries and divergences that have weakened past extended alliances, this process has also resulted from the new electoral law adopted in late 2013 that gives precedence to the largest bloc to form a government, be it an electoral coalition that campaigned under a common platform during the elections or one that emerged after the polls (5). This change has given incentives to political parties to run individually rather than in the framework of broader lists, which used to garner as many votes as possible in order to gain power. Some have seen in such voter dispersion a positive step toward the end of sectarian politics in Iraq (6), but it could also reflect the challenge of predicting electoral results as well as difficult post-electoral bargaining when the time comes to put together a cohesive coalition strong enough to lead the new cabinet.

On the Shiite side, the former United Iraqi Alliance, which consisted of Islamist parties that won the 2005 elections, split into two currents back in 2009: the State of Law coalition (SLC) led by al-Maliki, and the Iraqi National Alliance headed by Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and joined by Moqtada al-Sadr's movement. In 2013, both al-Hakim and al-Sadr announced that they would run separately in the 2014 elections. As regards the Sunnis, an equal logic of fragmentation has been ongoing, with the breakdown of secular Shiite Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiyya) since its political setback in 2010 (7). Only the Kurds have tried ahead of the polls to overcome their divisions about the future of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraq in general to present a common front around the Kurdish Alliance. Yet, this move has mostly failed due to the inability of the two dominant parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, to give enough space to newcomers, such as opposition group Gorran (8).

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Al-Maliki against the Sunnis

Since 2003, Iraqi Sunnis have been marginalised from power and symbolically boycotted the first elections in 2005. Despite having long promised their reintegration into the political process and the state apparatus, al-Maliki in fact largely perpetuated this pattern. In 2010, he even revived the de-Baathification measure to ban several hundreds of Sunni candidates in elections that year, especially prominent politicians belonging to Allawi's bloc (9). Since December 2012, predominantly Sunni regions, first among them the restive al-Anbar province, have violently confronted the central government following the arrest of guards to former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, an al-Anbar native himself linked to Iraqiyya. Many Sunnis point to what they perceive as a Shiite sway over politics and discriminatory policies whose objective would be to "de-Sunnify" Iraq (i.e., through anti-terrorism laws, arbitrary arrests, travel bans and death sentences). Instead of engaging in any dialogue with its opponents, al-Maliki has resorted to increasingly repressive methods to present himself as the only barrier to terrorism, including a sustained assault on the Sunni cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014 to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's takeover (10).

Sunni grievances and mobilisation have yet not translated into a united leadership capable of defying al-Maliki's bid for a third term. Neither have Sunni parties succeeded in coordinating their positions, nor have anti-government protests coalesced into a strong movement due to conflicting ideological backgrounds and political aspirations (11). Compared to the 2010 election, it can be anticipated that fewer Sunni voters will go this time to the ballot box in the absence of a powerful representative coalition on the model of Iraqiyya. In October 2013, Allawi declared that his movement (renamed Wataniyya) would run alone, a choice also made by his former Sunni partners such as Parliament speaker Osama Nujaifi's United party (Mutahhidun) and Deputy Premier Saleh al-Mutlak's Arabiyya bloc (12).

The fact of the matter is that Sunnis have generally grown apart from the political arena and from their own leaders, whom they have blamed for not having brought any progress. Many are skeptical that electoral participation is a viable means to express their voice and effect tangible change (13). In a context of relentless political splintering, al-Maliki will thus meet limited Sunni opposition. This, however, may lead to more violence in the coming months. Radical voices have emerged within the Sunni community in response to al-Maliki's unresponsiveness to popular demands and his unrestrained use of force. Some Sunnis have been increasingly exposed to the propaganda of extremist elements working to exploit their frustrations. The outcome has been a growing militarisation of the protests and the emboldening of jihadist groups,

including local tribes that now consider self-defense justified in the face of al-Maliki's policy (14).

Serious Shiite competitors

The most credible opposition to al-Maliki's ambition for a third mandate will likely come from his own sectarian constituency, marked by increased intra-Shiite competition. This should be all the more so as the Hawza, the religious establishment based in Najaf, has given no voting recommendation this year as opposed to its past efforts to unify Shiite positions to win the elections. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has noticeably distanced himself from the political process, essentially in reaction to what he deems poor government performance and political corruption. The authoritative Shiite leader also opposes the idea of an Islamic state that certain parties and militias would like to establish (15). Al-Maliki's SLC, which finds itself without a major ally in these elections, but still pretends to form a majority, faces two main Shiite competitors: the Sadrists and the ISCI, both of which adhere to quite disparate political agendas. The prime minister has attempted to exploit these divergences to diminish them (16).

Since al-Sadr's decision to retire from politics last February, the future of his movement, the al-Ahrar (Freemen) parliamentary bloc, has become uncertain. Some believe that al-Sadr's move is only a tactic for the Shiite leader to reposition himself ahead of the polls, both on the national scene and among supporters who question his authority (17). Al-Sadr remains one of the most virulent critics of al-Maliki, whom he called a dictator and a tyrant (18). At the same time, his changing attitude has left part of his electorate confused and may have served al-Maliki's divide-and-conquer strategy. For its part, the ISCI-led Citizen coalition (Muwatin), which unites 18 other parties, today ambitions to regain the political standing it lost in 2010. It focuses its program on state reform, and has preferred a more conciliatory outlook to appeal to Shiite voters. It presents itself as a reliable successor to al-Maliki but does not enjoy the same support and favors a federalist stance that does not speak to more nationalist Shiite Iraqis.

In spite of the many challenges and internal dissent that he faces due to his autocratic leaning, al-Maliki still appears best placed to win the elections. Together with his Islamic Dawa party and Deputy Prime Minister Hussein al-Shahristani's Independents, he seems to retain the greatest ability to form a coalition in the wake of the vote. Of all the candidates, he is more importantly the one backed by both Tehran and Washington, which since 2003 have had a major influence over Iraq's transition and which seek to stabilize the country to protect their respective interests (19). Beyond his adroit maneuvers to avoid the reemergence of a Sunni leadership and his tense relations with

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Kurdish leaders, al-Maliki has managed to weaken his Shiite rivals by depicting them as incapable of exerting power. He has thereby exacerbated political divisions and fractured the ranks of the opposition. Al-Maliki has also attracted several militias such as the Badr Organization, the ISCI's former military wing, and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous), an Iran-supported Sadrist offshoot that set up its own party (Sadiqun) and has been involved in the Syrian conflict on the side of the al-Asad regime (20).

Towards a third term?

Against the backdrop of profoundly transformed Iraqi politics, the growing gap between al-Maliki's partisans and opponents will critically determine the alliances that will rise from the April 30 vote. Already, the Sadrists and ISCI are contemplating a new coalition to oppose al-Maliki's grand design (21). Those two will likely cooperate after the polls, with possible support of the Kurds and even the Sunnis. Al-Maliki's manifold adversaries could also take advantage of splits within the prime minister's own bloc, in particular if Dawa members were to consider renewed premiership for al-Maliki would marginalize them and strengthen his monopoly in the party and politics (22). Al-Shahristani, who for some time was rumored to be willing to run separately, would then probably also take his distance from the SLC.

To thwart these breakaway trends and larger opposition, al-Maliki keeps hold of two assets: the current legislation, which, absent provisions restricting the terms of Iraqi officials, allows for his prolonged stay at the upper echelon of the state (23) and the Iraqi military and security forces, which al-Maliki has placed under tight control and which could well prove instrumental in staging a coup if al-Maliki does not succeed in forming the strongest coalition(24). While it would mean the end of Iraq's thorny and violent path toward democracy, such a scenario would not be unprecedented given the country's history.

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