

Iraq's New Dawn: A New Government and A New Political Reality

by [Farhad Alaaldin \(/experts/farhad-alaaldin\)](/experts/farhad-alaaldin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Farhad Alaaldin \(/experts/farhad-alaaldin\)](/experts/farhad-alaaldin)

Farhad Alaaldin is a writer and observer on current political affairs in Iraq and Kurdistan. He currently serves as the head of the Iraqi Advisory Council, and he has also worked as an advisor to two former Iraqi presidents. Alaaldin is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

The new Prime Minister of Iraq—Mustafa alKadhemi (MK)—has finally proven to be the nominee who has made it to the finish line and formed the 7th Iraqi government after the 2003 regime change. The new government, sworn in on early hours of May 7, saw 15 out of 22 of MK's cabinet ministers accepted. As five nominees failed and two positions were left vacant, the remaining seven positions are expected to be filled in the coming weeks. This peaceful transition and friendly handover between PM Abdul-Mehdi and MK constitute yet another sign that Iraq has a working democratic process despite the country's many challenges.

The international community, including both the United States and Iran, have sent congratulatory messages to the Iraqi leaders, wishing the best for Iraq with the formation of its new government. This international recognition represents scenes not seen since the inauguration of Haidar alAbadi when he was appointed as PM in 2014. But even with the warm welcome both inside and outside Iraq, the path for the new government is riddled with challenges and difficulties that must be overcome soon in order to put Iraq back on track.

Political Significance

The formation of this government carries with it some significant political points that are worth highlighting, especially with the election of MK to the position of prime minister. MK represents the first PM who is not from the old generation of leaders and is not a member of one of Iraq's major political parties, though he was nominated by them. Nor does the PM have strong political affiliations, a point further demonstrated by his absence from any party's leadership council. In addition, the ministers chosen to form MK's cabinet (save for a few) are also far from staunch party politicians. Almost all of those nominated have loose party affiliations.

Without clear party affiliationS, MK's path to nomination was similarly notable. He was initially nominated for the position months ago by Ammar alHikma—President of the alHikma Movement—and President Barham Salih, but his candidacy was rejected by the political parties, especially Fath. After two subsequent failed nominations, MK returned as a favourite. This time, his candidacy was supported both by his previous supporters and several prominent members of Dawa Party leadership. This combination paved the way for MK to become the nominee and to form his government despite the opposition of State of Law, who chose to oppose the nominee to the end.

Throughout the political negotiations that led to MK's successful nomination, the process was also notable for being a thoroughly Iraqi one, with little to no influence from Iran and the United States. Though both powers kept a close eye on the proceedings, neither was able to dictate the course of negotiations directly.

Government backers and opposition

Given the central role of internal Iraqi concerns and the difficult nature of the nominations process, the role of each major Iraqi political block in securing or opposing MK's nomination is instructive for understanding how his future government will mesh with the current parliament. The build-up to government formation saw many twists and turns, with the euphoria of nomination soon disappearing in the corridors of negotiations. Many who previously appeared to be celebrating his nomination subsequently opposed the nomination, while others who initially opposed the nominee turned into avid supporters.

Shia Parties:

a. Sairoon—Iraq's large Shia bloc led by Muqtada alSadr—initially did not play much of a role in MK's nomination, though Muqtada alSadr had suggested him along with two others back in December 2019 as a possible PM candidate. However, the support of this bloc gained much more significance in the final five days of his nomination, when all seemed to be collapsing. Sairoon's direct intervention with Fath helped bring the latter back to the negotiations table, and after three long days, Sairoon came up with written guidelines for the government formation that gave Fath assurances on many ministries, to which MK agreed. Concurrently, Sairoon pledged that if Fath rejected MK, they would follow suit. The backing of Sairoon, once unremarkable, has ultimately become the backbone of the new government.

b. Fath: This party's opposition to MK's nomination was no secret even during his initial nomination. Yet upon MK's second nomination, Fath initially backed him as an alternative to former PM Designate Adnan alZurfi in order to remove the latter candidate from the race. Once MK released his first cabinet nomination on April 22, Fath flatly rejected his choices, refusing even negotiations for several days. A second list was submitted on April 26 that Fath also rejected, with their position appearing to harden further. The turning point, as mentioned above, was the encouragement of Sairoon in the last few days of nominations. On the day of the vote, when MK wanted to take away Ministry of Social Affairs from Fath, the party put up last-minute resistance that could have derailed the whole process. Nevertheless, MK reversed his position and changed the candidate to their preferred choice, whereby Fath voted for the government.

c. State of Law Coalition (SoL): Negotiations with Nouri alMaliki, chairman of SoL, were perhaps the toughest of all for MK and his team due largely to the fact that MK was nominated with the help of the Dawa Party leadership members who are not in line with Maliki's View of the Party. SoL was seen as particularly challenging as Maliki had played a critical role in the downfall of both previous nominations. MK considered winning over Maliki as an extremely important factor, but he was faced with tough demands from SoL that included two ministries (Ministry of Interior and HE) as well as the post of Vice President. Negotiations ultimately collapsed, and SoL issued a formal statement that they were in opposition to his government. SoL leadership hoped that this rejection would rally the doubters around them to form a coherent block to the nomination. But while alWatanya—led by former PM Ayad Allawi—joined SoL in opposition, their collective impact fizzled out once Sairoon shifted to higher gear to gather support for MK.

d. Hikma and alNasr: Both parties played a vital supportive role in the nomination process, specially alHikma. That being said, both parties' support went through various degrees of strength, from wholeheartedly supportive to lukewarm, depending on the stage of negotiations. Even so, their politicians continued backing MK and, at the final vote, played an important role in pushing him past the threshold of needed votes.

The Sunni blocs

a. Tahaluf alQiya (TQ): The negotiations with TQ were also a series of ups and downs, especially when MK announced the first list of nominees. TQ politicians were initially furious about the selection of ministers, and some factions within the bloc pledged to oppose him at every point. Yet through close negotiations organised by Speaker of the Council of Representatives Mohamed AlHalbusi and by reaching agreements on the candidates for some of the ministries, TQ ultimately backed MK, and their support proved instrumental for the government to pass.

b. Liberated Governorates Coalition (LGC): A new coalition, led by the prominent businessman Khamis alKhanjar, emerged amidst the negotiations period. This coalition claimed to represent twenty-two members of the Sunni MPs in parliament and sought to influence MK's ministerial nominees. Khamis worked closely with MK and successfully negotiated for at least two of the six ministries allocated to the Sunnis. This LGC support was also point of tension between TQ and MK and, paradoxically, ultimately became a reason for TQ to join MK in order to limit LGC's ability to influence nominations. Ultimately, TQ's deal with the other parties made sure that the primary LGC candidate failed.

The Kurds

The Kurdish parties, as had been the case previously, declared their support for MK from the outset and were instrumental in both derailing the efforts of former PM delegate. Al-Zurfi and elevating the chances of MK to become the PM delegate. However, their early, unequivocal support actually weakened their hand during the subsequent negotiations for the government formation. As a result, only one Kurdish minister passed through the line. And though MK has given all sorts of pledges of support to the Kurds, Kurdish parties have found themselves in a much weaker negotiating position with MK as PM compared to their negotiating position with him as PM delegate. Kurdish parties seem to make a habit of arriving late at the party and leaving early with little to show for their effort—this time was no exception.

Political Expectations

Many observers have already started predicting the outcome of this government and its chances of success or failure. Yet the complexity of Iraq's challenges—along with the unpredictable nature of several concurrent global crises—make it very difficult to predict what might take place next.

MK has already announced that holding parliamentary elections will be one of the first priorities of his cabinet. Assuming that there will be elections soon, Iraq's Shia parties will likely be the first to begin campaigning on an opposition platform to the government. These parties believe that opposition will play better with their constituencies, and this likely political pressure in the near future suggests that the new government's honeymoon period will be short-lived.

Aside from standard political opposition, the government has a series of tough choices to make for the rest of the year. Such choices will not be popular among Iraqi voters and are likely to further encourage parties to join the opposition. Growing parliamentary pressure suggests some noisy future parliamentary sessions; it is likely that at least some ministers will be dragged into the parliament to face a vote of no confidence. Despite these pressures, the government should survive and continue its course until the elections.

The work of the government over the next few months will likely focus on managing the COVID-19 crisis coupled with the financial meltdown. As such, though Iraqis should recognise the effective wheel of democracy turning, there will likely be little to celebrate in the near future. The peaceful handover of power has helped Iraq to climb out of the power vacuum caused by the resignation of previous government. Yet the new PM will face the same political challenges on top of dire financial and health issues, and with no political bloc backing him explicitly and no political party of his own, his position signals plenty of political trouble ahead. In the meantime, MK as a Prime Minister is a

new reality that many Iraqis can be hopeful about: having a person who supports human rights and freedom of speech as the country prepares for new elections suggests at least the potential for a better future for Iraqis on the horizon.



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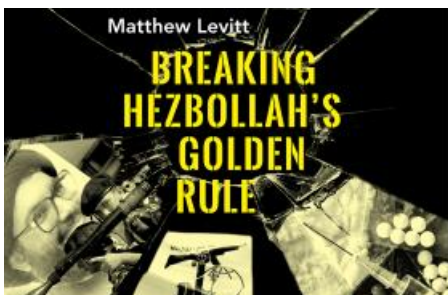
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