

Could Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri Maliki Be Forced Out?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

In conventional political terms, Maliki likely remains the frontrunner for the premiership, but the argument that he is unable to stabilize the country by sharing power is once again gaining currency.

Overshadowed by Iraq's intensified security crisis, the country certified the results of the 30 April parliamentary elections on 1 June -- triggering the start of efforts to ratify the next prime minister and his cabinet with at least 163 seats in the 325-member parliament. Two-term Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and his State of Law alliance performed well, winning 92 seats directly and being able to count on at least a further 10 to 20 seats held by close allies. Mr Maliki's Shia opponents could muster about 60 seats, the Kurds a further 53, the numerous Sunni Arab or nationalist lists a total of 60, and independents carrying the balance.

Competing as an MP in Baghdad, Mr Maliki won 721,000 votes -- by far the highest personal vote of any Iraqi politician and even more votes than the 622,000 he gathered in 2010. This performance put Mr Maliki in a commanding position to overcome opposition to a third term in office. Indeed, when I met him and members of his inner circle in March they were confidently predicting their victory and making detailed plans for the third term.

The loss of government control across northern Iraq has arguably changed the picture.

"RESERVE ARMY"

In conventional political terms Mr Maliki remains a viable candidate and probably even the frontrunner for the premiership. But the argument rehearsed by his Arab and Kurdish opponents -- that he is not able to unite and stabilise the country by sharing power with his opponents -- is once again gaining currency.

In the light of the Sunni uprising, there is a powerful logic to a change of top-level leadership. The government led by Mr Maliki has proven resistant to making new compromises with Iraq's Sunni Arab community on the formation of

federal regions in Salahuddin and Diyala provinces, and regarding court cases brought against senior Sunni leaders. Likewise, Mr Maliki has a very poor relationship with Iraq's Kurds. He has cut their monthly budget allocation for four of the six months so far this year and opened arbitration against Turkey for allowing the Kurds to independently export oil using the Iraq-Turkey pipeline. Mr Maliki even reportedly rejected Kurdish offers of military support early on in the current crisis. Now the offer has been withdrawn.

Baghdad and the Shia areas of Iraq are very likely to be secured by the government and its new largely-Shia "reserve army". But it will take a new national unity effort to return government control to northern and western Iraq. This is because the government's mainly Shia forces probably cannot re-stabilise the north on their own. Unless backed by local Sunni allies, their presence might only deepen the security crisis as Sunni Arabs perceive a new invasion. Stability will require participation from Sunni and Shia Arabs plus Kurds.

"INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP"

Mr Maliki is considered unacceptable by Iraqi Kurds, many Sunni Arabs and at least one Shia faction -- Moqtada al-Sadr's followers -- because they do not trust the promises he makes. Whatever compromises the federal government makes to potential Arab and Kurdish partners in the next government, they will not be able to deliver on all of them immediately, making trust an essential ingredient of the next government and of the near-term effort to roll back insurgent gains in Iraq.

Weighing into the debate, the Shia religious establishment and US government are signalling in increasingly blunt language that Iraq needs a radical change of political direction, though stopping short of calling for a change of leader. Throughout 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the senior Shia religious leader in Iraq, has criticised the government's record, perceived in Iraq as a snub to Mr Maliki. US military intervention has been firmly linked to the emergence of "inclusive leadership" in Iraq. Only US Congressional leaders openly call for Mr Maliki to be ousted, viewing him as unsalvageable.

At this point Mr Maliki and his supporters do not accept that he should step down. After all, they argue with some justification, he and his bloc did receive greater electoral endorsement than any other faction. Is Iraq not a democracy?

ALTERNATIVE FIGURE?

Iran continues to signal its support for Mr Maliki, using a raft of Shia militant groups like the Badr Organisation and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous). The mainly-Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) -- with 30 seats in the parliament -- has softened its opposition to a third term for Mr Maliki and co-operated with forming the "reserve army".

These factors are vital because as long as Mr Maliki is considered a viable leader by the Shia, he stands a strong chance of returning for a third term. The identity of Iraq's next prime minister will be decided behind closed doors by the Shia, and they will take care to project a united front. Their decision is probably now weeks away and may be resolved by the end of Ramadan in late July.

If the Shia collectively decide that Mr Maliki must go, for the sake of the Iraqi Shia and national unity, then they will probably draw a new candidate from the ranks of Mr Maliki's own Dawa Party, a component of the State of Law Alliance. This alternative figure could be a Maliki confidante such as Tariq Najm, his capable old chief-of-staff. He could be trusted by Mr Maliki to screen the ex-premier from politically-inspired prosecution.

Due to his grip on the cabinet and security forces, as well as his election results, the sidelining of Mr Maliki is not a step the Shia will take lightly because it could trigger an even darker scenario than the one that Iraq is currently struggling through. If Mr Maliki were to militarily resist a Shia call to step down, it could have devastating effects on

the cohesion of the Shia community, opening the risk of a suspended democratic process, destabilisation of oil-rich southern Iraq, and true fragmentation of the whole country.

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