

Who Will Win the Iraqi Elections?

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Brief Analysis

The Iraqi parliamentary elections, scheduled for April 30, will take place in just a few weeks. Candidates and competing electoral blocs are campaigning fiercely against each other, despite the absence of political stability and general security. In recent months, there has been an increase in forced deportations and an ongoing presence of terrorist organizations in the Anbar province and militias backed by Asaib Ahl al-Haqq in Diyala.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is currently facing great difficulties and is struggling to find possible solutions to prevent his defeat in the upcoming elections, despite reports suggesting his victory. In a recent report published by the Brookings Institution in Washington, for example, the author forecasts Maliki's victory with 110 seats, also citing Iran's role in the elections. Although the report seems to have been informed by on-the-ground information and Iraqi media, those closely following Iraqi politics understand the situation quite differently.

During the 2010 elections, Maliki won 89 parliamentary seats, despite his objection that prompted the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to recount the votes, only to find that the results remained unchanged. If we compare the 2010 and 2014 general elections, it is clear that significant differences exist between the two periods. During the 2010 elections, Maliki had a good reputation, not only with Shiite constituents but also with the Kurds and certain Sunnis. Furthermore, the political situation was more stable and there was no intra-Shiite political tension. Today, however, the security situation has worsened significantly, with approximately 1,000 Iraqis being killed each month. Although Iraq's budget has increased, reaching \$150 billion USD, recent reports from the Central Office of Statistics within the Ministry of Planning noted a rise in the level of poverty, which now stands at 6 million Iraqis. Moreover, in 2010, both the defense and interior ministers garnered the consent of all political blocs, which is no longer the case, and so far, the parliament has been unable to reach an agreement on the budget.

COMPETING LISTS AND THEIR PROSPECTS

In 2010, the likelihood that Iraq would be able to build a successful state by the end of 2014 seemed strong. However, Iraq has since witnessed a pattern of failure, the security situation has deteriorated, diplomatic relations have worsened, and terrorism continues unchecked. Accordingly, Maliki is unlikely to win more than 65 seats in this year's general elections; however, some of his allies, such as the Iraq Coalition sponsored by Iraqi businessman Fadel al-Dabbas, might gain 10 or 15 seats. Therefore, an alliance able to win 80 seats might be established, although this is a best-case scenario.

For its part, the Mutahidun (United) Coalition, headed by Usama al-Nujaifi, has lost clout among its Sunni

constituents and has been weakened due to its inability to deal with any of the issues. It has been unable to solve the crisis in Anbar or the forced deportation carried out by militias in Diyala. Moreover, it has become clear that it is representing the Muslim Brotherhood, whose reputation has diminished since the 2010 elections, when Tariq al-Hashimi presided over the Islamic party. Yet after al-Hashimi understood that it was declining in popularity, he decided to leave the party and formed the "Tajdeed (Renewal) List," with which he participated in the 2010 elections. If Nujaifi participates in a list that is clearly representing Turkish-backed Islamists as a Sunni representative, he will be making a grave mistake. In fact, Nujaifi's popularity was further diminished among Sunni circles after rumors spread on social media of his ties to Iran and a picture was posted of him kissing the Iranian Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani during a visit to Tehran. Moreover, the failure of his brother -- Athil al-Nujaiifi, the governor of Ninawa province -- in managing the province's affairs has weakened him further. Therefore, Nujaiifi and his Mutahidun Coalition might win a maximum of 18 to 20 seats in parliament, if not less.

The Iraqi National Dialogue Front, led by Salih al-Mutlaq, is likely to win 4 to 5 seats at best. Meanwhile, the al-Karama list, backed by businessman Khamis Khanjar, could win 7 or 8 seats. This list in particular represents Sunni protestors and, in one way or another, speaks subtly on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Civil Movement, growing under the leadership of distinguished figures, might win 7 to 10 seats, as Allawi's Iraqiyah list is losing support due to Allawi's failure to meet voter expectations. Yet Baathists will likely cast their ballots in Allawi's favor due to their lack of a better alternative. Some Shiite elites will also support him, especially after he refused to ally with any of the sectarian Sunni lists and included civil society figures in his list. By this token, Iraqiyah may win a total of 25 to 30 seats.

This brings us to Ammar al-Hakim, Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Kurds. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Hakim's movement is currently the predominant Shiite movement for several reasons. Hakim is offering a new, nonsectarian political rhetoric, even if only as a formality. He has also included civil society representatives and esteemed secular Shiite figures such as former Minister of Interior Jawad al-Bulani as well as Ahmad al-Jalbi and well-known socialist Nabeel Yasin. These figures will have a positive influence on the Shiites, who are eager for something new.

Sadr, however, included three lists or fronts in order to garner as many votes as possible, and he will presumably be able to preserve his 40 seats. Finally, the Kurds will win 40 seats based on their demographic weight.

This analysis leaves us with the impression that Maliki is in a very difficult position; because he became everyone's enemy, he will not be able to establish a larger list. However, it seems that Maliki is undertaking new initiatives. A recent report suggested that he is gathering a force from his tribe in the city of Touirij in Karbala province, and he is bringing them to Baghdad. Also, under the auspices of the "National Safety Law," he in effect adopted an emergency law granting himself absolute authority. Finally, he will rely heavily on the votes of the military and the police corps, and on Iran's influence to meddle with the final results.

IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Iranians have grown tired of escalating tensions between Shiites in Iraq, to the point that some Iranians have begun to speculate that Shiite influence in Iraq is nearing an end. Iraqi locals, however, consider this to be a highly unlikely scenario. Iranians have supposedly asked Shiite leader Kazem al-Husseini al-Hairi to intercede for them in an attempt to convince Sadr that Maliki should remain prime minister. In addition, Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, has distant relations with Iran and is seen as being much closer to Turkey. Hakim, it seems, is caught in a conundrum. On the one hand, he is attempting to win over Iran, while on the other, he is trying to appease his coalition, which includes groups opposing Iran's influence. However, Hakim's interests are far more important than his ties. Therefore, he might align himself with Iran's ally, Maliki, in return for greater authority

over the Iraqi government.

Iran certainly has a stake in the outcome of the elections, as they will have a decisive impact on Iran's future in Iraq. Therefore, its interference will be heightened, despite the bitterness of the intra-Shiite feud and the Shiite-Sunni conflict, both of which could still undermine the elections should they escalate.



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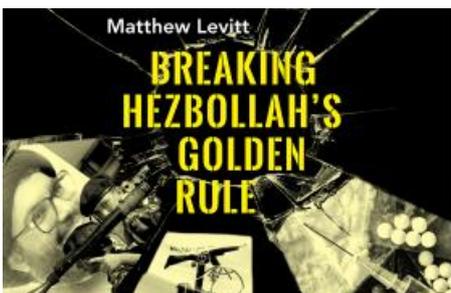
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