

Maliki Bolsters Iraq Reelection Chances

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Since winning a second term, Iraqi prime minister Nouri Maliki has strengthened his grip on power.

There are two widespread views of Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, who has just returned from his first high-level meetings in Washington since the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011.

One view portrays him as an emergent would-be dictator, maximising his executive authorities and crushing rival institutions and personalities using state power.

Yet no sooner had Mr Maliki attained this reputation than he began to crash from one political and security crisis to another.

To many observers, this suggested that his political days were numbered and that, if freely held, the national elections scheduled for 30 April 2014 would eject him from power.

So which is the real Nouri Maliki: a strongman whose rule could span decades, or a quickly forgotten character likely to be unseated in Iraq's first post-occupation polls?

Overreaching

Initially viewed as weak when he entered office in 2006, Mr Maliki only bloomed into a more successful and confident leader in 2008 when the U.S.-led surge allowed for decisive security operations against the Mehdi Army, a militia associated with the populist Shia leader Moqtada Sadr.

Building on the momentum from these military victories, Mr Maliki began a remarkably effective consolidation of executive power that has placed Iraq's security services, the Supreme Court, the treasury, central bank and state media under his hand.

Despite this recentralisation of power, Mr Maliki needed to carefully manage the political balance within Iraq's

fragmented parliament after the US withdrew in December 2011.

Instead, almost from the moment of U.S. withdrawal he started to alienate too many Iraqi factions at the same time.

By the spring of 2012, the Kurdish parties and Mr Sadr's allies had attempted a parliamentary vote of no confidence in the Iraqi premier.

The effort narrowly failed due to strenuous Iranian lobbying on Mr Maliki's behalf, but it became clear that he would face a major challenge in securing a third term in 2014.

Mr Maliki's low point came in the April 2013 provincial elections.

Not only did they result in a lower haul of seats for his State of Law list -- it won 22 percent, down from 28 percent in 2009 -- but it also lost control of key provincial councils like Baghdad and Basra as other Shia parties allied against him.

Worse yet, the role of Maliki loyalists within State of Law also seemed diminished in those elections.

In his former stronghold Basra, for instance, only three of the 16 elected State of Law councillors were firmly associated with the prime minister.

Comeback Strategy

With his back to the wall, Mr Maliki has demonstrated resilience and fancy political footwork in recent months. He has given way to the Kurds on a range of issues, staying out of their way as they strengthened their hold on the disputed city of Kirkuk and as they completed an independent oil pipeline to Turkey.

In return, the Kurds remained silent on 26 August when Mr Maliki's men on the Supreme Court struck down legislation that would have denied the premier a third term.

In an increasingly successful effort to splinter Sunni Arab opposition, Mr Maliki is selectively reactivating the Sahwa (Awakening) movement of armed tribal auxiliaries and continues to promise de-Baathification and anti-terrorism reforms to Sunni factions.

And the premier has sought to remind Iraqis of his role in rolling back militia rule in 2008.

On Monday, he urged Iraqis to "remember the control of Moqtada's militia that fostered murder, kidnapping and theft in Basra, Karbala, Baghdad and other provinces".

Mr Maliki is also playing to the establishment's political interests.

He was not the only leader of a bloc to lose seats to smaller independent lists in the 2013 provincial polls, leading him to support legislative efforts to place a restrictive voting threshold on the 2014 national elections that would block the election of independent candidates.

Last, but not least, international partners are being intensively courted.

Mr Maliki is perhaps unique in being able to boast the United States and Iran as his closest backers. Both have stepped into Iraq's political melee to save him from removal on numerous occasions since 2006.

With the Syrian crisis continuing to unfold, he remains a vital partner for Iran, whose resupply flights and convoys transit Iraq on their way to aid the Assad regime.

Mr Maliki has also sponsored a determined Iraqi government effort to reach out to Turkey, using Sunni Arab leaders as intermediaries to reduce anticipated Turkish opposition to his reappointment.

And despite a bruising public reception in Washington, the prime minister will probably succeed in portraying last

week's White House visit as tacit U.S. endorsement for a third term.

Democratic test

Mr Maliki is aiming to emerge from the 2014 polls as the frontrunner for prime minister largely on the basis that he is a known quantity and because replacing him may potentially be too difficult or destabilising.

He stands for "business as usual", counting on the fact that most Iraqi political leaders are more afraid of al-Qaeda and emerging independent politicians than other establishment factions.

It is still possible that a surprise could unfold once the process of picking a premier goes behind closed doors following the 2014 polls.

One scenario for Mr Maliki's replacement may be a "Shia palace coup", where poor electoral results create an opening for the other Shia parties to replace him with a new "grey man" that they hope would be easier to control.

Yet as the incumbent caretaker prime minister during the next transition, Mr Maliki will hold many important cards that could tip the balance, including control of the Supreme Court, the arbiter of election controversies, as well as the security and intelligence agencies.

As the attempted May 2012 vote of no confidence misfired, Mr Maliki's willingness to step down in a peaceful transition was never tested.

Indeed during that crisis, praetorian forces were brought to alert at the entrances to Baghdad and around the government centre, reacting to the potential vote almost as if it were a coup attempt.

Any scenario that requires Mr Maliki's removal would test the proposition that Iraq remains a constitutional democracy three years after U.S. withdrawal.

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