

End in Sight for Iraq's Government Stalemate

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Brief Analysis

On October 1, incumbent Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki moved a step closer to gaining a new term when he earned the support of several groupings within the pan-Shiite Iraqi National Alliance (INA). Al-Maliki can now count on 49 to 54 seats from the INA, in addition to the 89 seats won by his own State of Law Alliance (SLA) in the elections this past March. This gives him up to 143 seats out of the 163 required to ratify a new prime minister.

Though this latest development could galvanize al-Maliki's opponents to form an opposition bloc of motley composition, the more likely outcome is that al-Maliki will be elected head of a new government. The United States -- having given up its combat role in Iraq, with plans to withdraw completely by the end of 2011 -- may be pleased with this turn of events, but concerns have arisen because the likely compromise is apparently being brokered by the Iranians and influenced strongly by the radical Shiite movement of Muqtada al-Sadr. Furthermore, the arrangement grants only a marginal role to Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

Numbers Game

Since the March 2010 vote, few have expected an alliance between the two largest blocs -- Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah and al-Maliki's SLA. As a result, second-tier coalitions such as the INA and the Kurdish lists have occupied the key terrain in Iraq's postelectoral politics. According to the October 1 agreement, al-Maliki now enjoys the backing of the INA, one of these two key constituencies. The achievement is all the greater given that the largest of the INA parties to support al-Maliki -- the thirty-nine-seat bloc associated with al-Sadr -- had previously been firmly opposed to his candidacy. Iran appears to have played a strong role in arranging this marriage of convenience, with the Los Angeles Times reporting that Tehran facilitated negotiations and provided mediators to strike the deal. If the Sadrists, the Badr Organization, and Ibrahim Jafari's list continue to back al-Maliki, then the standing prime minister needs only another nineteen to twenty-five seats to ensure his reappointment.

Though al-Maliki could get the needed votes from a patchwork of small lists and defecting opponents, he will more likely seek to win over the fifty-seven-seat conglomeration led by the Kurdistan Alliance. Al-Maliki is distrusted by the Kurds, who have witnessed his efforts to extend federal power in the disputed areas and in oil policy. Even so, the Kurdish parties appear closer to allying with al-Maliki than with his key adversary, the ninety-one-seat Iraqiyah

coalition, led by the Shiite (but secular) Allawi. This preference by the Kurds may owe in part to al-Maliki's agreement to finally hold a national census, originally scheduled for October 24 (but postponed until December 5 under pressure from Arabs and the Turkmen minority), in order to satisfy a persistent demand of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Al-Maliki has also ceded ground on issues such as the development of KRG security forces with federal funding and U.S. military training support. The Iraqiyah movement, in contrast to al-Maliki's SLA, remains a problematic potential partner to the Kurds because it includes strongly anti-Kurdish parties.

Government Scenarios

Two credible government-formation scenarios prevail. The first and more likely might be termed the "al-Maliki bandwagon," which would center on 190 to 200 seats filled by the SLA, Sadrists, and Kurdish lists. Other parties would quickly jump on the bandwagon, so to speak, in an attempt to find a spot within the new government. Defecting elements of Iraqiyah, which represents the overwhelming majority of Sunni Arab (and secular Shiite) voters, would probably be given a token role in such a government.

The second and less likely scenario might be coined the "anyone but al-Maliki" government. In this scenario, Iraqiyah and the Kurds would set aside their shared misgivings in order to deny reelection to the incumbent. They would be joined by those elements of the INA that have expressed dissent over the alliance's nomination of al-Maliki, notably the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) -- which holds eight seats -- and Fadhilah (six seats). Such an alliance could muster a wafer-thin 164-seat majority. To offset the dissonance caused by what would be a minority-Shiite government in a majority-Shiite country, the premiership would likely be bestowed upon Adil Abdulmahdi, an ISCI politician and current vice president.

Challenges for U.S. Policy

The government-formation process will have a significant impact on U.S. policy and objectives in Iraq because it will establish the political balance within the Iraqi cabinet -- the Council of Ministers -- where increasing numbers of key decisions will probably be made to curtail the future prime minister's powers. Just as significant, the government that emerges will set the tone for the next four years, establishing a relationship with the losing factions that tends toward either the antagonistic or the cooperative. The United States has a strong interest in ensuring the latter, which will allow the planned drawdown of U.S. military forces to be carried out with less risk of destabilization.

In the event that al-Maliki is reappointed, Iran's apparent role in facilitating the new government could create problems for the United States. Regardless of Iran's actual role in the negotiations, many segments of Iraqi society, particularly Sunni Arab communities, would view a return to power by al-Maliki as a victory denied to Allawi. Moreover, such communities would view the new government as blessed by Iran and evidence of America's relative weakness. Though components of Iraqiyah may join the government, Allawi will struggle to serve under an al-Maliki premiership. As a June 2010 poll by the International Republican Institute noted, 74 percent of respondents across the Sunni provinces felt that a government formed without Allawi would lack legitimacy. A resultant combination of carefully orchestrated insurgent attacks, missteps by the predominantly Shiite-led security forces in Sunni Arab areas, and the reinforced perception of an Iran-backed federal government in Baghdad could drive renewed violence in northern and central Iraq.

Alongside internal resistance, a new al-Maliki government would likely be received poorly by the Gulf Cooperation Council states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which has strongly backed Allawi's candidacy. Likewise, Iran could well make further advances to the KRG in an attempt to create an alternative procurement hub to Dubai and a source of oil products to partially offset the future effects of sanctions. Of more immediate concern, an al-Maliki government would likely mean an enhanced role for Sadrists in Iraq's Ministry of Interior, a situation that could complicate the already difficult task of helping Iraq make the transition to police primacy and coordinating the handover of police

training from the Pentagon to the U.S. Department of State. Extension or renewal of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement could also be compromised by stronger Sadrist and Iranian influence over the ruling supercoalition.

These factors do not necessarily suggest that an Iraqiyah-led government would be preferential to U.S. interests. Indeed, an Iraqiyah-led government with minority representation for the Shiite Arabs and viewed as having been installed by the Americans or Saudis might be a destabilizing factor itself. Instead, it is clear that whichever government-formation scenario unfolds, substantial risk exists that Iraq's fragile stability might be further undermined by the effective exclusion of a major political bloc. The United States -- in sharp contrast to Iran -- has stated repeatedly that it will work with any coalition that wins the political contest in Iraq. The U.S. government now needs to join with like-minded regional partners and members of the international community to exert the maximum possible pressure -- without pushing members of the Iraqi supercoalition deeper into Iran's arms -- to ensure that room is made on the government bandwagon for the other parties.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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