

Iraqiyya's Path to Power

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As the news broke that his cross-sectarian alliance was leading last month's parliamentary election with 91 seats, former Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi was seen on television, grinning and receiving well-wishers in his Baghdad headquarters. His supporters took to the streets, jubilantly dancing and exchanging congratulatory embraces. It was, however, a short-lived victory. Since election day, there has been little reason for either the leaders of his coalition, al-Iraqiyya, or the 2,851,823 voters who endorsed the alliance, to celebrate.

All trends currently suggest that another candidate, potentially the current prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, will leapfrog Allawi and emerge as the dominant force in the new Iraqi government. On March 25, a ruling by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court increased this likelihood: The court determined that though Iraqiyya secured the largest number of seats, it might not get the first shot at forming a government. In response to a March 22 request by Maliki's office to clarify the Iraqi Constitution, the court ruled that election lists could merge after the elections -- and if a newly formed list then constituted the largest alliance, it would gain the privilege of attempting to form a government. Bad news for Allawi.

An Allawi-led government will send a number of positive signals about Iraq's future development. On the national level, it will mark the beginning of a national reconciliation process among Iraq's religious and sectarian groups. Regionally, it will help Arab states overcome their unjustified fear of engaging with the Shiite politicians who have emerged as the leading figures in post-Saddam Iraq. And internationally, Allawi will strike a more balanced relationship between Iran and the West.

Tehran immediately went to work unifying the two main Iraqi Shiite alliances: Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA), which won 89 seats, and the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), which won 70 seats. Both groups sent delegations to Tehran after the results were announced to discuss the merger of the two alliances. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, along with his vice president, Adel Abdul Mahdi of the INA-aligned Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), also traveled to Iran shortly after the results were announced. Officially, they were visiting to celebrate the Persian new year, Nowruz, with other leaders from the region.

But that is not how the trip was perceived in Baghdad. "Iran is interfering quite heavily, and this is worrying," noted Allawi in a March 30 interview with the BBC. "They have invited everybody -- but they haven't invited us -- to Tehran." The potential merger of the SLA and the INA, along with the Kurdistan Alliance (KA) and its 43 seats, would

give the bloc 202 seats in parliament -- a strong majority in Iraq's new 325-seat parliament. In effect, Allawi will be sidelined.

But this is Iraq -- and the game is far from over. The rulings of the Supreme Court and Iran's role as a political matchmaker have certainly placed Iraqiyya in an unenviable position. However, if Allawi can successfully resolve a number of issues central to Iraqiyya's political fate, his alliance could still regain its lost momentum.

Allawi's first task will be keeping his coalition partners disciplined and on message. Iraqiyya's strength, and its weakness, lies in its composition: Many of Iraq's highest individual vote-getters are within the alliance. Running in Baghdad, Allawi received 407,537 votes, and Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi received 200,963 votes. In Ninewah province, Osama al-Nujaifi, leader of the local Hadbaa list, a predominantly Iraqi Sunni party that has a volatile relationship with Iraqi Kurds, won 274,741 votes.

These prominent figures played a central role in Iraqiyya's strong showing, but also present Allawi with a challenge as he attempts to build bridges with other coalitions. Nujaifi's anti-Kurdish rhetoric led Iraqi Kurds to condemn "chauvinist" elements within Iraqiyya, citing this as a reason why it was difficult to work with the alliance. Hashemi, on the other hand, has affirmed his ambition for the presidency -- a stance that has also antagonized the Iraqi Kurds, who have made it clear that Talabani is their candidate.

Allawi was able to somewhat allay Kurdish fears by visiting Iraqi Kurdistan twice after the elections and meeting with Talabani and Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani. In addition, a senior delegation from Iraqiyya visited the region recently. But given that the government-formation process is likely to take months, maintaining a disciplined public message within Iraqiyya will be crucial. Allawi must convince his allies to put their campaign rhetoric behind them, and shift their mentality toward reaching out to potential coalition partners.

Wooing the Kurdish alliance remains Allawi's most pressing challenge. Iraqi Kurds are not only leery of the anti-Kurdish figures in the alliance, they are skeptical of the alliance's ability to form a government in the event of the Shiite alliances' merger. Allawi will no doubt use his warm personal relations with Kurdish leaders to make the case that his alliance with Nujaifi and Hashemi will not affect his position on issues affecting the Kurds as prime minister. He will also likely remind them that neither Maliki nor his predecessor Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who was forced to step down in 2006 in part because of Kurdish objections, were consistently attentive to Iraqi Kurdish concerns.

Allawi may also be able to use the ongoing power-sharing crisis in Ninewah province, caused by frictions between Hadbaa and the Kurdish parties, to convince the Kurds of the need for a Kurdish-Iraqiyya alliance. This issue, as well as the final status of Kirkuk, are top priorities for the Kurds. Iraqiyya captured six seats out of 12 in Kirkuk, allowing Allawi to make the argument that his coalition's support in the disputed province makes it necessary to work with him on the national level to resolve this explosive issue.

Finally, Allawi must hit back against the claims, encouraged by the SLA and to a lesser extent the INA, that his return as prime minister represents the restoration of the Baath Party to power. The de-Baathification commission, which excluded prominent Iraqiyya figures prior to the election for alleged Baath Party ties, stoked these fears -- now, the same panel is calling for the disqualification of several winning Iraqiyya candidates. This narrative is preventing the INA from seriously engaging Iraqiyya, lest it be seen by the Iraqi Shiite public as supporting the return of the Baath. Allawi can lean on his personal story to counter this strategy: He survived an assassination attempt in February 1978 by Saddam Hussein's agents and was a prominent member of the Iraqi opposition to Saddam during the 1990s -- and he's got the scars to prove it.

Allawi will also likely need to consistently turn to Iraq's most revered Shiite religious figure, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to improve his image in Iraq's largely Shiite south. Sistani is unlikely to endorse Iraqiyya or any other alliance, but any statement from his office that denies the existence of a veto on Allawi, or makes it clear his coalition's weight

should be reflected fairly in the government, will provide a tremendous boost to Iraqiyya. Sistani's blessing could limit the SLA's and the INA's ability to portray Iraqiyya as a camouflaged Baathist alliance and give Allawi an opening to win over Shiite voters.

Iraq's simmering sectarian tensions make achieving any of the above tasks an almost herculean task. At the moment, it appears likely that the SLA will be able to exploit the Supreme Court's ruling, as well as Iraqi Kurdish and Iraqi Shiite fears of Iraqiyya, to hold on to power. However, if Allawi can overcome these obstacles, the former prime minister may achieve a historic comeback -- and redraw Iraq's political map in the process.

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