

The Iraqi political machine's "tricky path"

By Bashdar Pusho Ismaeel



Resolution of Iraq's issues not without their "perils and dangers"

As the painstaking election process stumbles to a close in Iraq, the intricate political work has just begun.

Arranging and preparing for the national elections in Iraq was complicated enough. The elections, finally held on March 7, 2010, were hailed by Western powers and generally observed as successful; however, this was after much wrangling over the election law that saw the elections postponed, a highly contentious decision to ban hundreds of alleged ex-Baathists weeks before the elections, not to mention deadly suicide bombings on Election Day designed to deter would-be voters.

However, the convoluted and tricky path for the Iraqi political machine is very much ahead. If the holding of relatively successful elections in the face of a number of challenges was painstaking itself, the formation of a new government to appease embittered Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites against a backdrop of mistrust will be an even tougher task that will drag on for months longer.

Political jostling, with only handfuls of ballots left to be counted, has already commenced with the key parties vying for power already well on the path of seeking coalition partners, with no group alone likely to win the 163 seats required to form government. The power for government is augmented with the fight for the key positions of President, Prime Minister, and Parliament speaker. The position of President, for example, has already become heated by remarks in some nationalist circles that since Iraq has an "Arabic" identity, the post should be held by an Arab.

However, even before tiresome negotiations ensue, the Iraqi High Independent Electoral Commission (IHEC) will have its work cut out to address claims and counter-claims of voter fraud and irregularities, particularly in Kirkuk. The IHEC is already under fire for the labored nature of announcing the votes, which has aided claims of electoral mishaps and even calls for a full recount in some circles.

A different flavor

At least on paper, the elections present a good prospect of facilitating cross-national reconciliation. The political parties attempted to undercut the sectarian divides, with Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and his closest contender and former premier, Iyad Allawi's al-Iraqiya, encompassing a number of political parties across sectarian lines.

With the Sunni turnout showing a marked increase from the boycott of 2005, the competitive nature of the elections was evident with divisions present within traditional Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish alliances.

The race for the hot seat

Whilst Maliki's hard-line leadership alienated a number of groups, he was equally heralded for installing security in Iraq and possessing the right credentials as the nationalist leader that Iraq required. On the back of the highly successful showing at the 2009 provincial elections, results revealed to date put Maliki in prime position to win a majority once all votes are tallied up.

State of Law coalition is ahead in the symbolic Baghdad constituency, which remarkably represents one-fifth of the overall seats on offer. Al-Maliki was ahead in several Shiite-dominated provinces with the predominantly Shiite Iraqi National Alliance (INA) a close second in a number

of these provinces, as well as leading in three southern provinces.

Against the popular view that religious parties have not fared as well, the Sadrist bloc of the INA has gained a credible number of seats, and their influence as well as that of neighboring Iran may well dictate the shape of the future coalitions. A strong showing by Moqtada al-Sadr is particularly bad news for Maliki, who instigated the infamous and bloody crackdown of his militia in 2008.

Whilst Maliki may be a leading contender, his quest to reassume power in Baghdad is far from sealed. His old foes and newly created adversaries will almost certainly jockey ardently to ensure that he does not win a critical second term in office.

In contrast, the surprising contender for the hot seat is Allawi. Results show that the secular and nationalistic agenda of al-Iraqiya bode strongly amongst Sunni voters in north and western provinces, many who remain sceptical at Maliki's Iranian connections and Shiite control of security forces. Al-Iraqiya gains include Nineveh, which has the second highest number of seats up for grabs. As a result of the strong electoral showing, Allawi is neck-to-neck in the votes counted to date with Maliki. Allawi could well strike a coalition agreement with the Kurdish groups or the INA, as well as other smaller parties.

In this respect, the coalition opportunities on the table have far greater significance than ever before. Depending on who can be enticed into the political fold, a number of coalitions can be struck and thus the jockeying promises to be as intensive as ever.

Kurdish wildcard

The Kurds are widely acknowledged to assume the role of kingmakers once more. With the Kurds looking to achieve

between 60-65 seats, this will have significant bearing on who ultimately assumes the premiership in Baghdad.

As far as the Kurds are concerned, if you have the power to make a king, then you have to ensure the "right" king is "made" at all costs.

Any future coalition will almost certainly require the support of the Kurds, and this places great leverage on the Kurdish bargaining position. The Kurdish support for Maliki at crucial times arguably helped to salvage the Baghdad government, especially when Iraq was on a fierce downward spiral between 2006 and 2007.

A number of Kurds grew increasingly sceptical of Maliki, but with al-Iraqiya vying directly for power with the Kurdistan Alliance in Nineveh and especially in Kirkuk, where they have based their support on promises to ward off Kurdish attempts to annex Kirkuk, Allawi is hardly a firm favourite either. Comments from al-Iraqiya liking Kurdish attempts at wresting control of Kirkuk to Israeli settlements was hardly the right tonic to sweeten the growing bitterness.

Either way, the Kurdish aspirations of peacefully implementing Article 140, resolving the issue of disputed territories and agreeing on a national hydrocarbon law, will certainly hold fundamental importance to any prospective Baghdad partnership.

With growing pressure from the Kurdish public and political competition at home, the KDP and the PUK under the Kurdistan Alliance umbrella can ill afford to leave Baghdad without Kirkuk and the key Kurdish demands.

Kurds must stay as close as they can to the throne of power to safeguard Kurdish interests, and may well support any legislation and lobbying further south as long as their status quo is maintained and ultimately enhanced.

Race for Kirkuk

If the hotly disputed race for Kirkuk needed any incitement, the close race between al-Iraqiya and Kurdistan Alliance for the province is increasing in intensity all the time. If the Kurds assume a majority as they did in 2005 and as they anticipate once more, this will aid their claim to annexing Kirkuk to Kurdistan, with many eyeing the elections in Kirkuk as a de-facto referendum.

While the final figures may well be disputed under contentious guidelines outlined in the election law specific to Kirkuk, the planned census in October 2010 will ultimately serve as the real battle to secure the future status of the city.

Change in Kurdistan

The three provinces that officially make up the Kurdistan Region had the highest turnouts across Iraq. With the new Kurdish opposition, Change Movement (Gorran), entering the fray in dramatic circumstances in 2009, the race for votes in Kurdistan took on additional importance. As expected, Gorran fared well in the province of Sulaimaniya, but the contest with the PUK was as close as ever, with the PUK performing strongly in Kirkuk where Gorran was expected to make inroads.

It is too early to say to what extent the fractious nature of the Kurdish vote this time around hindered their quest for influence in Baghdad, but what is clear is that without a united Kurdish voice in Kirkuk and particularly Baghdad, the new political competitiveness within the Kurdish scene may well hamper Kurdistan.

Gorran may well use their newfound leverage in Baghdad to indirectly pressure the Kurdistan Alliance for the much-hyped "changes" they propose in Kurdistan itself.

Furthermore, with the

much higher turnout of Sunnis than in 2005 and with an increased number of seats in Parliament not resulting in the anticipated number of seats in Kurdistan in proportion to the population, the Kurdish position becomes more tentative as the dust settles on the new political climate in Iraq.

American Withdrawal

Months of protracted negotiations and heated discussions will take place, all the while as the U.S. increases its demobilization efforts in anticipation of its iconic withdrawal by the end of August 2010.

While the next government will be the first under full Iraqi sovereignty and under a relative blanket of security, this does not mask the key constraints and challenges that may hinder Iraqi progress once more.

Progress is very much reversible in Iraq, and with emotive and historically entrenched angles on critical national issues, the resolution of these issues will not be without their perils and dangers.

Regardless of any election outcome, entities in Iraq will still decree a significant share of the Iraqi cake. While the system of proportional representation is designed to reflect the overall will of the electorate across the mosaic, the common policy of appeasement will be evident. For example, to keep Sunnis on the political stage, the expectation is they will still assume key posts, a key percentage of the armed forces, and so on. This appeasement policy was a key reason for the decline in Sunni insurgency and the newfound security in Iraq, not necessarily just strong-handed tactics by al-Maliki.

The greatest danger for America is that while Iraqis bicker and the U.S. military arsenal wanes, this may yet give encouragement for insurgents to reassume center stage.

From the Heart of Kurdistan Region

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P 6

Erbil's new airport begins flights



GLOBE PHOTO: Safin, Hamed

Erbil's new International Airport

National P 3

Kurds prepare for Baghdad journey

Kurdish politicians are advising strict unity concerning Kurdistan's internal views before entering into negotiations with winning Iraqi parties. And Iraqi-Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani has called for meetings with winning Kurdistan candidates in the coming days.

National P 8

Kurds around the globe celebrate Newroz

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