

As kingmakers, ensuring the right king is "made" is paramount to the Kurds



Months of painstaking preparations for the national elections and weeks of the controversial counting of the votes are finally over. However, before the Iraqi political bandwagon ponders a breather, the real work starts now.

The final election results encapsulated an enthralling, tense, and close contest. This was a crucial milestone for the new Iraq and even more so as all sides of the Iraqi ethno-sectarian mosaic turned out in good proportion, striving to make a difference from years of frustrating post-war turmoil, instability, sectarianism, and lackluster living standards. The elections provide hope of a declined sectarian divide in Iraqi politics, and the possibility of the establishment of the first all-encompassing coalition in Iraq housing the embittered groups.

In reality however, the process of government forming will prove protracted and could well linger for many months longer.

None will be more weary of the future political shape and eager to strike the right alliance than the Kurds. The Kurds will likely be kingmakers again, as the only other distinct ethnic group with power, their support to the remaining Arab political rivals in Iyad al-Allawi, Nouri al-Maliki and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim will hold crucial sway to surpassing the all-important 163-seat mark to form government.

As such, their role as "kingmakers" carries enormous responsibility on

Kurdish aspirations and the Kurdish people. Being kingmaker is one thing; ensuring the right king is "made" is another.

In the aftermath of the last elections, Kurds were in a more powerful bargaining position than in today. After a Sunni boycott and a larger allocation of seats per population for the Kurdistan Region, the Kurds decided to side with Maliki's Shiite alliance in what initially seemed to good affect.

The Kurds were able to assume the posts of President, Foreign Minister, and Vice Prime Minister. However, as the months and years rolled by, while the Kurds dug their heels in at times to the desired affect and many bills reflected Kurdish jockeying, the key disputes and national goals of the Kurds become increasingly distant and stagnant in resolution.

As Maliki's influence and credibility slowly rose, especially in light of improving security conditions from the brink of civil war, the Kurds who supported Maliki at key times became increasingly despondent with the more hard-line government stance and Baghdad's labored approach to the implementation of key articles of the Constitution.

However, this should not come as a great surprise. While Maliki may hardly be first choice for a Kurdish partner based on the tenuous political marriage, Allawi is hardly the flavor of the month either. The same foot-dragging was employed by Allawi as Interim Prime Minister of



Voters seek their names in front of a polling center in Ankawa in Erbil.

GLOBE PHOTO/ Aiyob Mawloodi

Iraq prior to the 2005 legislative elections, which saw slow progress on Kurdish-sided disputes. The growing nationalist stance of Allawi's al-Iraqiya group, particularly concerning Kirkuk and other disputed territories, is hardly an ice-breaker either. Although a secular Shiite, the tough, nationalistic tone of Allawi and his nonsectarian base saw his alliance as a new and logical platform for the Sunni voice.

This places the Kurds in a difficult predicament, which in theory has been made more challenging by the structure of the elections this time around. Firstly, disunity within Kurdish ranks with Change Movement (Gorran), running on a separate list to the KDP and PUK, potentially cost the Kurds a number of seats. Gorran won over 60,000 votes in Kirkuk but ultimately did not meet the necessary threshold to gain seats.

The other crucial factor was the Kurdistan Region receiving a modest rise in the number of national assembly seats, which were increased from 275 to 325,

with the rest of the south picking up the majority of the allocation of extra seats. Furthermore, bigger Sunni turnouts in the north and northwestern provinces also contributed to a dilution of Kurdish power in these mixed provinces, which they had assumed almost by default in the last elections.

Kurdish support should not come cheap, and if it means that the coalition-building process drags on for another few months, then so be it. It is better for Kurds to get firm and written guarantees this time around even if they are perceived as stalling the political process and pressured by Baghdad and Washington to "back down," rather than to wait another four years for the resolution of key issues impacting the Kurdistan Region to be further sidelined and become stale.

The Kurdish alliance won 43 seats with other Kurdish parties claiming another 14 seats in total. The voting was generally well-spread with no party coming through as clear winners. Ultimate victors were Alla-

wi's al-Iraqiya group with 91 seats, but this was only two more than Maliki's State of Law coalition. As a result, this means that the permutations for coalitions are more ajar and thus the negotiation and bartering process will be as delicate as ever.

Certainly, marginalising any bloc will come with its own headache, while attaining a broad reconciliation will still prove to be a bitter pill to swallow for the new Iraq.

Adding to the heated mix is the tricky allocation of the key ministerial posts. While the Kurds enjoyed a fair share of key positions in the past government, distribution of key posts to appease Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni sentiments will not be so straightforward. The running for the next President, held by Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, is already gathering heat with some Arab sides proclaiming that the President as a representative of the Iraqi nation should be an Arab. However, more crucially, the Kurds need to focus on positions that will ultimately hold influence and

sway within Iraq itself. For example, the posts of Ministry of Oil or the Interior Ministry will be a lot more beneficial to the Kurds than positions that are high on paper but may do little to directly favor Kurdish interests in reality.

Meanwhile, as credible as the newfound opposition is to the Kurdistan Region, this will almost certainly have negative connotations if Kurds enter Baghdad divided. With the rise of Arab nationalist parties, Kurds can ill afford disharmony on the national stage. Disputes over Article 140, the national budget, status and funding of Peshmarga forces--not to mention oil sharing--are only going to get fiercer before any resolution becomes more likely.

Attempts by Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani to ensure a united front in Baghdad, and pledges by Gorran leaders to maintain unity on Kurdish national issues, is an absolute minimum if Kurds expect any fruit from any prospective alliance they strike.

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Kurds negotiate together on government formation

P 3



GLOBE PHOTO

Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani speaks at a press conference after a meeting with the representatives of Kurdistan Region's winning lists, Salahaddin, April 3.

National P 5

Ninevah talks produce progress

Two weeks ago, the Kurdish Brotherhood List and the Arab Hadba national List in Nineveh province held two important meetings in Istanbul and Baghdad to end the current boycott of the Provincial Council by the Kurdish Brotherhood List.

Business P 8

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