

Democracy in Iraq beyond the elections

All eyes on Baghdad as country forced to configure new Parliament in wake of Maliki loss

By Chibli Mallat

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All eyes in the Middle East are on Iraq. Were the elections free and fair, and will they hold? What is the new configuration of forces? Who will the next prime minister be? These are some of the most immediate questions.

Many more questions will be raised, as the dust starts to settle on the parliamentary earthquake which saw the formerly dominant bloc come third, while the sitting prime minister's group came unexpectedly second to former PM Ayad Allawi.

Iraq has long taught analysts and political leaders that they should be cautious predicting the turn of events. This is no less true now, but I will venture a few remarks of a prospective nature.

1. All the major parties are expected to accept the results. The election appears to be free. It is appropriate to compare it to the disastrous presidential election in Afghanistan last year to appreciate the democratic success achieved in Iraq on March 7. While some will moan and protest, including a disappointed prime minister, the major parties have all done relatively well, none were destroyed in the process, so all should want to protect the results. More significantly for democracy in Iraq, the proof of the free and fair nature of the election lies in its surprising result.

Since the sitting government was defeated the election was surely free, with great numbers showing up and braving the polls against the backdrop of violence that claimed the lives of 30 people on election day alone.

2. The Sunni vote suggests serious integration in the new Iraq. While the greatest loser in the elections is the Tawafuq party, whose leader Ayad Samarrai was the sitting parliamentary speaker, the success of former Premier Iyad Allawi's bloc is owed to a remarkable discipline among Iraqi Sunnis, who succeed in reasserting themselves as key partners in the country's governance.

This is the more remarkable a trait since the main partner in the bloc headed by Allawi, Saleh Mutlak, had fallen prey to last-minute de-Baathification exclusion from the list of candidates. It would be unfortunate if the Sunni embrace of the new order, which they had by and large rejected in previous national elections, were ignored in the formation of the government. Considering the political savviness of the Iraqi leadership, however, there are reasons to be optimistic on this score.

3. A remarkable sign of the maturation of democracy appears in patterns of institutional opposition emerging across the country. Goran, the openly reformist movement in Kurdistan, as well as the Kurdish Islamic parties, have dented the absolute hold of the PUK and the KDP, the two dominant Kurdish parties since Kurdish Iraq was freed from Saddam Hussein's clutches in 1991.

Also important is the relative meltdown of Shiite-Sunni antagonism with the victory of Allawi,

and the collapse of Shiite "unity" between State of Law and the former INA. While sectarian and ethnic divisions will continue to loom large over the Iraqi scene, the March 7 parliamentary earthquake has shifted the stern terms of the traditional harsh division towards a far more fluid system.

4. Negotiations will be hard, but they may not be as protracted as the shake-up suggests. INA loses its dominant bloc in parliament, and there is no replacement. In truth, the INA at the end of the parliamentary term was the pale shadow of its own self, and the victory of the Sadrists within the current weaker alliance (40 out of 70 seats) will allow them to be heard again.

Still, 40 out of the 163 majority needed is relative, and they will have to decide for a share in power against a continuation of street violence that forced their leader to live outside Iraq. The Sadrist rebellion may well be over.

So Iraqis should enjoy their democratic achievement, and hope that the formation of government will not take another five months as it did in the drawn-out 2005 vote.

Though there will be constitutional controversies at each and every step, the large question is at this point the nature of the political negotiating: will there be a grand bargain, assigning the three major positions, speaker, president and prime minister at once, or will the new parliamentarians go about it piece-meal?

A major constitutional problem is the sequence of events. All three top positions, speaker, prime minister, president are up, with the presidency complicated by the end of the Presidency Council under the transitional provisions of the constitution. Soon the election of the speaker will be forcing difficult deadlines.

Speakership goes first to a vote, then a president is elected who in turn nominates the prime minister who can form a cabinet and get a vote of confidence for it. While all the dates and deadlines may prove loose, a better route would be a package deal for all three positions.

Stumbling over each of the three positions, starting with the speakership, risks throwing the country into protracted negotiations that undermine the relative progress of security, and will no doubt alienate the brave Iraqi voters sealing in blood, yet again, their yearning for elected government.

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