

America's Puppets. Maliki, Allawi and the Quest for Power. Iraqis Pay the Price

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“The steps of power are often steps on sand.” – Edward Counsel,
Maxims

The seemingly intractable political stalemate Iraqis patiently endured for the past eight months over who will be the country's next prime minister may finally be over, but it did not come without extracting a heavy toll on the people.

The March 7 parliamentary elections saw former prime minister and perennial United States ' favorite Iyad Allawi and his Iraqiya coalition narrowly defeat incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law bloc.

As most know by now, the March ballot gave Allawi's Sunni-dominated, secular Iraqiya list 91 parliamentary seats, while Maliki's State of Law came in a close second with 89 (after Maliki's protestations of electoral irregularities and vote manipulation, a court-ordered recount of votes cast in Baghdad did not alter the final result).

Falling a distant third was the National Iraqi Alliance (NIA, previously known as the United Iraqi Alliance), a grouping of predominately Shia parties, notably the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council headed by Ammar al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr's eponymously-named movement. The Sadrist won a resounding 40 of the 70 NIA seats, trumping longtime political and religious al-Hakim family rivals, and allowing the young cleric, for the first time, to become the NIA's most important voice.

No coalition came close to garnering the 163 seats needed to claim an absolute majority in the 325-member parliament and unilaterally form a government, however. The Iraqi Supreme Court ruled that the prerogative of forming one would *not* fall on who had won a plurality of seats (as Iraqiya did) but on who could put together a majority when parliament was seated.

And so the horse-trading began, between and *within* alliances. For example, it was assumed that the NIA would join with Maliki, whose own Dawa party was once part of the United Iraqi Alliance in the 2005 elections.

But Sadr remembered well the bloodbath Maliki unleashed on his Mahdi Army in Basra and Sadr City —the teeming Baghdad slum of two million—in May 2008. He indicated he would

have no part in supporting a Maliki premiership and even held an unofficial referendum in Sadr City for residents to vote for their preferred candidate (former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari won).

Muqtada, now studying in Qum , Iran was pressured by the ruling clerical establishment (or the Revolutionary Guards?) to accept Maliki as prime minister, although he demanded the release of Mahdi militia members held in Baghdad 's prisons as a precondition.

On Monday—for the first time since the March elections—leaders from all main political blocs gathered in the northern city of Irbil under the auspices of the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Massoud Barzani, to hold power-sharing talks in hopes a national unity government could be hobbled together before parliament convenes Thursday. As of this writing, it appears they ultimately succeeded

The outline of the agreement is that Maliki would stay on as prime minister, Talabani as president and the choice of parliamentary speaker would be given to Iraqiya. Allawi would head a new body called the “National Council for Security Policy” with powers ostensibly equal to that of the prime minister, although this remains unclear.

In the face of the Irbil gathering was renewed violence directed at the country's Shia Muslims. In the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf suicide bombers targeted Iranian pilgrims and Iraqis alike, killing dozens. The week prior, bombings across Baghdad 's Shia neighborhoods killed 60 and wounded hundreds and came on the heels of scores of Iraqi Christians slain in Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church in Baghdad .

It was emblematic of what had occurred for the greater part of a year: lives lost as politicians dithered.

Maliki, desperate to remain in power, could not fathom stepping aside in favor of a consensus candidate; a move that would have likely led to the formation of a unity government long ago.

While members of parliament continue to receive extravagant [stipends, salaries and perks](#) for having convened just *once* since March (and only for 20 minutes at that), ordinary Iraqis hope to just arrive home safely at night. They suffered under the blazing Iraqi sun this summer, where temperatures can soar to 49° C (120° F), with only two hours of electricity available daily to run air conditioners (for those who have them).

Average citizens' frustration and aggravation are not about the political machinations of leaders, but because no one bothered to express concern over their plight or address their needs: electricity, clean water, education, jobs and security.

In Iraq , steps on the path to power are not steps in sand, but quicksand. Now that their obstinate quest for power has been fulfilled, Maliki and Allawi could well find themselves sinking in it if they fail to provide these basic services. And the quicksand that swallows them will be the fury of the Iraqi people.

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