



Iraqis Take Back Their Country

Iraq's 2010 Elections as U.S. Policy Transitions

Brian Kaulis and Peter Juul | March 2010

Iraq's 2010 national parliamentary elections represent the latest step by Iraqis to reassert control of their own affairs, and the United States needs to maintain its strategic redeployment to help Iraq to stand on its own. The Obama administration's Iraq policy has motivated the country to continue on a path toward reasserting its sovereignty, but the administration has yet to determine how this new Iraq fits into its broader regional strategy.

The stakes are high for Iraqis in this election. The very nature and identity of the country has been left ill defined in the dozens of gaps in the country's constitution and broader legal framework. Iraqis will decide if their country will remain divided along ethnic and sectarian lines or be driven by a broader Iraqi nationalism, whether it will base its emerging government on democratic governance and the rule of law or another system, and whether it will choose to align itself more closely with Iran or with Arab countries to the west and south. Iraq's leaders may continue to hedge on many of these issues, even long after a new government is formed.

A clear direction is unlikely to emerge for months after the elections. Iraq's politics remain fragmented, with six main coalitions (outlined on page 4) contesting these elections. This wide array of choices between electoral coalitions and candidates makes it likely that no single group or faction will emerge victorious on Election Day, and postelection deals will be as essential as the vote in shaping the new government. The elections are a test of competing factions' strength, and it will probably result in a protracted postelection period of bartering over power.

The burden of deciding how to share power rests squarely on the shoulders of Iraq's leaders, and the postelection period will test whether Iraq's leaders are up to the task. The past five years of Iraq's political transition have been characterized by stalemate and deadlock on the central questions of how to shape a new order in Iraq after decades of Saddam Hussein's brutal rule.

For the United States, these elections will help determine the future direction of our bilateral relationship with Iraq. U.S. troops are redeploying on schedule, and the United States will be relying increasingly on its economic, cultural, and diplomatic tools to manage its ties with Baghdad. The election and subsequent process of government formation will test the character of the United States' new relationship with Iraq and how it deals with a still-fragmented Iraqi politics. Helping Iraqis manage a potential transition of power in their fragmented political system will challenge the Obama administration to effectively use all elements of U.S. power while recognizing that its power to shape events there is not unlimited.

As the dust settles in Iraq in the coming months, the Obama administration needs to determine how this new Iraq fits within its broader regional strategy, which continues to suffer from strategic incoherence—a lack of clearly defined goals for what type of broader regional security framework it would like to see emerge in the Middle East.

2010 elections: Iraq enters the next phase of its political transition

The 2010 parliamentary elections in Iraq will represent the start of a fourth phase of Iraq's political transition since the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

2003-05: A shaky foundation

The first transitional phase was characterized by a series of steps and missteps by the United States and its allies leading up to the October 2005 constitutional referendum and December 2005 elections that produced Iraq's current government. Iraq's political transition moved through a haphazardly organized constitutional process during this phase that ended with a constitution that had dozens of unresolved questions related to Iraq's governing system. A promise by constitutional drafters of postapproval reform on the eve of the October 2005 constitutional referendum made to mostly Sunni factions in order to get them to participate in the political process remains unfulfilled despite these factions' participation.

2006-07: Civil war and political fragmentation

The second phase of Iraq's political transition began in 2006 with the negotiations within Iraq's main Shia Islamist alliance, the United Iraqi Alliance, and between all major political coalitions to form a new government after the December 2005 elections. Those negotiations took nearly six months and resulted in a government that appeared in form as a national unity government, but in practice was unable to achieve significant progress in advancing Iraq's political transition.

A series of vicious internal conflicts raged in the different corners of Iraq from 2005 through 2007, and these conflicts led to the displacement of 4 million to 5 million Iraqis and the deaths of tens of thousands more. The centrifugal forces unleashed by Iraq's civil war caused even greater divisions among the country's political forces—in 2007 political parties and coalitions splintered away from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's "national unity" government, even as the surge of U.S. troops began in earnest and violence began to decline. Iraqi politics became more—not less—divided as violence subsided, and national political institutions were unable to cope.

2008-09: Increased participation, continued political deadlock

The third phase began in 2008 as more actors turned away from violence and entered Iraq's fragile and fragmented political process, including former Sunni insurgents and other actors who had boycotted politics before. Last year's provincial elections in Iraq offered some hopeful but still mixed signs of a political evolution. A handful of new political forces emerged—new coalitions touting nationalist instead of divisive sectarian agendas, and a more active engagement by a wider range of Sunni actors, many of whom stood on the sidelines in previous elections. New leaders and parties challenging the dominant leaders and parties were hopeful signs of a strengthening democratic transition, while entrenched parties gamed the system to their benefit. But more fundamental questions remain unanswered beneath the surface: How should Iraqis define themselves, their nation, and their new democratic system of government?

Near the end of 2008—the end of the surge—violence had declined, but Iraq did not achieve a sustainable consolidation of power among Iraq's competing factions. In fact, the surge may have frozen into place the accelerated fragmentation Iraq underwent in 2006 and 2007. More actors entered Iraq's political system and turned away from violence, but meaningful political reconciliation and consolidation remained elusive.¹

Passing election laws for the provincial and national elections became a major task that exacerbated Iraq's political fragmentation. Political divisions cut multiple directions: Arab nationalist parties pitted themselves against Kurdish nationalists, and those favoring a strong central government faced off against decentralizers and regionalists. Major disputes are not any closer to resolution, including the oil-revenue sharing laws, the Arab-Kurdish divide in Kirkuk and the disputed territories, and the unfulfilled Article 140 of Iraq's constitution.

2010: A year of uncertainty

A great deal of uncertainty looms as Iraq moves toward the fourth phase in its uneven political transition. It took leading political factions months to agree on the law and basic rules regulating elections and to define the number of seats in parliament. Some "new" political coalitions appear to be doing little more than rebranding the same old political

Key coalitions contesting Iraq's 2010 elections

Iraq's complicated politics have produced an alphabet soup of political movements that often defy simple sectarian and ethnic categories of Shia, Sunni, Arab, and Kurd. These movements have coalesced into six main groups—three that portray themselves as nationalist, and three others that remain closely linked to particular ethno-sectarian roots.

State of Law

State of Law is a hybrid coalition led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. It includes the Shia Islamist Dawa Party, but Maliki has based his coalition's appeal on a mixed strategy. One foot is planted firmly in Iraq's old sectarian politics with some anti-Baathist declarations, and the other foot is running on a nationalist law-and-order platform that Maliki employed in last year's provincial elections with some success. It has attracted movements and leaders that have localized support and includes splinters from other coalitions such as Tawafuq and Iraqiyya. State of Law also includes the Anbar Salvation National Front led by Sheikh Ali Hatem al-Suleiman. ANSF formed out of one of the Awakening movements, a tribal effort that helped reduce violence in Iraq in 2007-08.



Nouri al-Maliki

Iraqi National Movement

This largely secular nationalist coalition, also known as Iraqiyya, is headed by former interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi who served from 2004 to 2005 and his Iraqi National Accord party. Other key members include Saleh Mutlak, who was banned from running in the election by the de-Baathification Commission, and current Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, who vetoed an earlier version of the election law last fall because of his concerns about voting rights for Iraqi minorities and millions of Iraqis still living abroad as refugees. Iraqiyya also includes al-Hadbaa, an Arab nationalist party that won last year's provincial elections in Ninevah, which resulted in increased Arab-Kurd tensions near Iraq's third largest city, Mosul.



Iyad Allawi



Saleh Mutlak

Iraqi National Alliance

INA is a Shia Islamist coalition composed of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and Muqtada al-Sadr's movement, both of which have strong ties to Iran. ISCI is led by Ammar al-Hakim and Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi. The INA coalition includes the Shia Islamist Basra regional party Fadhila, as well as the Islah Party of former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari. Ali al-Lami and Ahmed Chalabi—two key figures in the pre-election de-Baathification controversy—

are members of the INA along with their Iraqi National Congress party. INA consists of most of the main elements of the United Iraqi Alliance outside of Maliki's Dawa party. The United Iraqi Alliance is the coalition that won a plurality in the 2005 national elections.



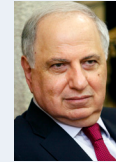
Muqtada al-Sadr



Ammar al-Hakim



Adel Abdul Mahdi



Ahmed Chalabi

Unity of Iraq

Unity of Iraq is a nationalist coalition led by current Interior Minister Jawad Bolani and his Constitution Party. His main partner is the leader of the Awakening Council of Iraq Ahmed Abu Risha. Neither Bolani's nor Abu Risha's parties have seats in the current parliament; both parties were formed after the 2005 elections.



Jawad Bolani



Ahmed Abu Risha

Kurdistan Alliance

The Kurdistan Alliance consists of the two major Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by current Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. Gorran is a reformist breakaway from the PUK and did well in regional elections last year. Gorran is expected to join with the KDP and PUK in the national parliament.



Jalal Talabani



Massoud Barzani

Tawafuq-Iraqi Accord

Tawafuq is a Sunni Islamist alliance centered on the Iraqi Islamic Party, a local offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. The IIP is led by Osama Tikriti, the party's secretary general, and Iyad Samarraie, the current speaker of parliament. Tawafuq has suffered from the recent defection of key members such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, but retains significant party machinery.



Iyad Samarraie

groups. Most troubling is the opaque and possibly extralegal manner in which hundreds of candidates were banned by the Justice and Accountability Commission and a series of court rulings in January 2010. This banning cast a pall on the official campaign period just as it began. Accusations and counteraccusations about what is actually happening behind the scenes have once again raised the specter of sectarianism and internal divisions.

New electoral reforms also change the voting this year. The 2010 parliamentary elections are operating with an open-list system, giving voters power to choose their candidates. Iraq used a closed-list system in the 2005 national elections, forcing Iraqis to choose from party lists who then doled out parliamentary seats to party members. The open list could conceivably reduce the power party bosses have in setting the priority list of candidates in the closed-list system used in 2005. Yet a more open system could lead to further overall fragmentation in Iraq's political system as much as it could enable politicians to act increasingly independent of party dictates. The hope that new nationalist tickets and different leadership combinations could bridge sectarian and ethnic divides and have success at the polls remains just that—a hope, thus far unrealized.

The six main coalitions competing in these elections mostly consist of many of the same leadership elites realigned and glued together in new coalitions of convenience based largely on vague platforms that do not appear to provide much hope for breaking the stasis of Iraq's politics. Even if the March election produces a quickly emerging governing coalition, it remains to be seen whether Iraq's leaders will find the right combination to tackle the tough power-sharing issues.

A severe trust deficit currently exists in Iraqi politics, and it is difficult to foresee at this stage a coalition government that will be capable of dealing quickly with many of the unresolved power-sharing questions. For example, if more Arab "nationalist" tickets do well at the polls, this could further exacerbate Arab-Kurdish tensions. And no single Iraqi coalition can win a majority of votes on its own as a result of Iraq's continued political fragmentation. At the same time, all of Iraq's political coalitions are extremely reluctant to enter power-sharing agreements out of fear of betrayal or resentment. This situation is a recipe for deadlock when the time comes for these coalitions to form a government.

Next steps for U.S. policy in Iraq and the broader region

Iraq's political fragmentation looms as the Obama administration focuses more of its attention on problems at home and other priorities abroad. Just as Iraq's political transition is moving into a new phase, so is U.S. policy. U.S. policy in Iraq will move into a new transition phase in the coming years, one in which Iraq once again becomes another country in the Middle East with which the United States seeks to maintain close bilateral ties and a strong strategic working relationship. How the Obama administration manages Iraq's election and government formation process will be indicative of how it intends to manage the United States' bilateral relationship with Iraq in the future.

President Barack Obama noted in his 2010 State of the Union address that “we will support the Iraqi government as they hold elections, and we will continue to partner with the Iraqi people to promote regional peace and prosperity.” The Obama administration remains heavily invested and engaged in Iraq despite criticisms of inattention.

Several Iraqi politicians have accused the United States of meddling in its affairs, and the United States for many years overestimated its power to affect political trends in Iraq such as intra-Shi’a politics or to bridge Arab-Kurdish divides in Ninevah or Kirkuk. But the United States under President Obama has nevertheless played a critical role as a mediator in helping resolve Iraq’s political disputes. It put forward considerable effort to intervene in the election law debate last fall and the de-Baathification dispute this year. Vice President Joe Biden flew to Baghdad in January, and Washington has hosted a steady stream of Iraqi leaders for consultations in advance of the March elections.

The first priority for U.S. policy during the 2010 elections and postelection coalition negotiations is to ensure that it meets at least a minimum of standards for an electoral process. Some argue that the lack of transparent processes that led to the banning of hundreds of candidates have already called into question the legitimacy of Iraq’s elections. Yet the United States going forward should work with the United Nations and other international actors to ensure Iraq’s elections are viewed as legitimate by Iraq’s voters.

A second priority is to play a supportive diplomatic role as Iraq’s leaders sort through what is likely to be a long, messy process for forming a new national government. The United States should avoid picking favorites in the election process and instead continue to affirm the importance of a fair and open process. American officials in Baghdad and Washington should be prepared to engage in diplomatic handholding and other efforts to defuse political crises and confrontations that are sure to arise during the process. The United States’ overall goal in the government formation process should be to ensure that Iraqi politics do not fragment further.

Iraq’s election provides a critical test for the Obama administration’s new diplomacy-centric policy in Iraq. Can the United States assist Iraq in moving forward constructively in its political transition despite the challenges of deep fragmentation within Iraqi politics? The outcome of the election will in part determine the kind of country Iraq will be for the foreseeable future—either contributing further to its fragmentation or allowing a national self-definition to coalesce and its politics to heal.

One of the worst mistakes the United States can make at this stage as Iraqis continue to reassert control over their own affairs is to get in the way of that process. Suggestions that the United States renege its commitment to redeploy its forces from Iraq, according to the schedule negotiated in the 2008 bilateral agreement signed with Iraq, are misguided. The Obama administration has begun to rebalance overall U.S. national security priorities in the Middle East and South Asia, sending more troops to Afghanistan as it draws down its forces in Iraq.

This redeployment strategy has risks, and the security environment in Iraq will remain uncertain, but the main objective driving U.S. policy should ultimately be to help Iraqis take control of their own affairs. Sticking to this schedule as closely as possible is best for broader U.S. national security interests unless there is a serious request by a unified Iraqi leadership to change the troop redeployment schedule. Even if Iraq's new government would make such a request, the United States would have to evaluate it in the context of broader security objectives in the region and globally.

The one element that remains missing from the Obama administration's Iraq policy is a serious plan that reintegrates Iraq with all of its neighbors in a coherent regional security strategy. For example, containing Iran's nuclear program has been one of the Obama administration's top priorities, yet it has not yet determined how the new Iraqi government fits with the objective of shaping Iran's strategic calculations. The United States has similar long-standing bilateral security cooperation efforts with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab Gulf countries to Iraq's west and south, yet the Obama administration has not presented a policy that helps facilitate Iraq's reintegration into the Arab world after decades of isolation.

The Obama administration has made the right moves to encourage Iraqis to take greater control of their own affairs. This process going forward won't be free from violence, and this transition will be complicated. But the transition should continue. As the United States redeploys its forces out of Iraq, it should seek to strengthen its bilateral ties with Iraq through diplomatic and economic means and develop a more coherent strategy in which the new Iraq that is emerging helps stabilize the broader region.

Endnotes

¹ For more background Iraq's political landscape as the U.S. surge of forces was drawing to a close, see http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/09/iraq_transition.html Brian Katulis, Marc Lynch, and Peter Juul, "Iraq's Political Transition after the Surge: Five Enduring Tensions and Ten Key Challenges" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008).