

Former CIA asset Allawi touted as next Iraqi prime minister

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The result of the March 7 Iraq election has given the largest bloc of seats in the 325-member parliament to the Sunni-based and ostensibly secular Iraqiya coalition headed by Iyad Allawi, a former CIA asset and one-time US-installed prime minister. With just 91 legislators, however, Allawi needs to strike agreements with other factions to obtain the necessary 163-seat majority.

Frantic negotiations and deal-making are underway. Nouri al-Maliki, the current prime minister, and his largely Shiite-based State of Law coalition, which won 89 seats and is the second-largest bloc in the parliament, have declared the result illegitimate and are demanding a manual vote recount. Over the weekend, State of Law representatives nevertheless took part in talks in Iran with leaders of the Shiite fundamentalist Iraqi National Alliance (INA), which won 70 seats. The INA is dominated by the Sadrist movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and the Iranian-linked Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). With the support of a handful of other parliamentarians, the two Shiite factions would have a majority and could prevent Allawi coming to power.

The Obama administration has rejected Maliki's accusations, sending a clear signal that it welcomes Allawi's success and wants him as prime minister. A joint statement by US ambassador Christopher Hill and military commander General Raymond Odierno declared there was "no evidence of widespread or serious fraud". The UN envoy Ad Melkert declared the result was "credible" and that a recount was "difficult because of time". The governments of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia publicly congratulated Allawi.

Under conditions in which a US war with Iran is being openly discussed, Washington does not want the next government in Baghdad to once again be dominated by Iraqi Shiite parties that have longstanding relations with the Iranian regime. Allawi, by contrast, is thoroughly steeped in the hostility of the region's pro-US Arab ruling elites to

Iranian influence in the Middle East.

To assemble a parliamentary majority without either of the Shiite factions, Allawi would have to do deals with virtually every other faction. Small Sunni, ethnic Turkmen and Christian-based parties have 18 seats and are likely to support him. He would need to make a deal, however, with the Kurdish parties from the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north. The Kurdish Alliance of the ruling parties in the KRG won 43 seats. Two Kurdish oppositional movements, Gorran and the Kurdish Islamic Party, gained 14 seats.

Any agreement between Iraqiya and the Kurdish factions is fraught with difficulties. During the election, Allawi opposed Kurdish ambitions for greater control over areas of northern Iraq. Some of his supporters virulently reject the Kurdish demand that the oil-rich province of Kirkuk be incorporated into the KRG. Iraqiya won half the seats in Kirkuk, overwhelmingly from the votes of the province's ethnic Arab and Turkmen population.

The international media has speculated on the possibility that the Sadrist movement, which won 38 of the INA's 70 seats, could split from ISCI and support Allawi. Leading Sadrists made statements during the election that their priority was to ensure that Maliki did not become prime minister again. Talks have reportedly taken place between Allawi and representatives of Moqtada al-Sadr.

While no US figure has openly said so, Washington's preferred outcome would most likely be an agreement between Allawi and Maliki to form a government based on their two coalitions. Maliki is a Shiite fundamentalist and sympathetic to Iran but as prime minister he loyally served US interests during the bloodiest fighting of the Iraq war from 2006 to 2008. He presided over the destruction of Shiite militias in Basra, Amara and Baghdad that continued to resist the US military.

In 2009, Maliki's Da'wa Party broke with ISCI and formed State of Law as a Shiite rival to the INA. He derives his main support from the US-created and trained army, police apparatus and government bureaucracy, which are dependent on the continued US control over Iraq. His coalition won most of its vote in Baghdad and the Shiite-populated south.

Allawi's base is among the Sunni population and secular Shiites. Iraqiya won the bulk of its seats in Baghdad and the Sunni-majority provinces of central and western Iraq. The Sunni elite rallied behind him, despite the fact that as interim prime minister in 2004, Allawi presided over the US destruction of the Sunni city of Fallujah and the general repression of resistance throughout Sunni-populated areas.

Under the US occupation, the Sunni political establishment that had power under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein has been sidelined. They view Allawi as their instrument to restore their privileges. A leading Sunni cleric, Sheik Mahmoud al-Sumaidi, bluntly told the British *Guardian*: "This is politics and politics is a dirty art. The Sunni scholars have forgiven him for Fallujah and we support him being prime minister."

At this stage, Maliki's coalition is publicly stating that it will not make a deal with Allawi. Behind-the-scenes, however, every effort will be made by the US embassy and military command to pressure the Iraqi factions into making some form of agreement as soon as possible—unlike after the December 2005 election when it took close to six months to form a government.

From the standpoint of US imperialism, the next Iraqi government, whether Allawi, Maliki or some other figure heads it, has three primary responsibilities apart from aligning with Washington against Iran.

* It will have to sign a new agreement with the United States by the end of 2011—the date the current Status of Forces Agreement expires—to allow the US military indefinite use of air bases that have been constructed at places like Balad, Al Asad and Tallil.

* It must implement laws that sanction the privatisation of Iraq's oil industry and give foreign corporations greater access and control over the country's vast untapped reserves of oil and natural gas. The current legislation is widely regarded by the energy transnationals as inadequate as it does not allow for the production-sharing agreement model

that delivers them the greater profits.

* As the bulk of American troops withdraw over the next 18 months, the Iraqi government will be required to suppress the ongoing opposition among the Iraqi working class and rural poor to poverty, lack of services, the plunder of the country's resources and an ongoing US military presence.

At the same time, the puppet government in Baghdad will have to try and hold the country together. In the north, the Kurdish elite is growing increasingly bitter over its inability to get control of Kirkuk and the northern oil fields, which was its main motive for supporting the US invasion in 2003. Sections of the Shiite establishment linked with the religious parties are deeply hostile to any substantial Sunni influence over the government. If the Sunni elites are sidelined again, however, they could resume their sponsorship of widespread armed resistance.

Incidents over the past several days underscore the ever-present political, ethnic and sectarian rivalries created by the US occupation. A bombing on Friday at a market in Baquaba, the main city in the province of Diyala, killed 59 people and wounded 73. The home of an Iraqiya-linked leader was bombed on Sunday in the town of Qaim, in Anbar province, leaving five dead and 18 injured. In Baghdad, a sniper shot dead an Iraqiya supporter.

Even more provocatively, security forces loyal to Maliki arrested four Iraqiya candidates in Diyala province on charges of involvement in "terrorism", while the Shiite-dominated Justice and Accountability Commission announced that it will attempt to prevent some elected candidates taking their seats because of past links to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. The candidates who were banned as "Baathists" before the election were overwhelmingly aligned with Iraqiya or other parties based among Sunnis or secular Shiites.



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