Iraq parliament meets to ratify power-sharing deal

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The Iraqi parliament has begun its first formal session since a March 7 election, ending an eight-month period of political crisis and stalemate. The meeting Thursday morning follows an agreement between three sectarian and regional parties on a power-sharing deal that will leave Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in office.

Under terms of the agreement, Maliki's State of Law party, which is Shiite-based, will retain control over the executive, including the prime minister's office. Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani will remain as president, a largely ceremonial position, while the Sunni-based Iraqiya bloc, headed by former prime minister Ayad Allawi, will hold two less important positions: speaker of the parliament, and chairman of an advisory council on security, a post newly created for Allawi.

In the parliament's first action, Osama al-Nujaifi of Iraqiya was elected speaker. Iraqiya spokesmen then demanded that before electing Talabani president, the parliament should vote to formally rescind decisions by the so-called de-Baathification panel barring former members of Saddam Hussein's ruling party, mainly Sunnis, from political life.

When this demand was rejected and the vote began on a second term for Talabani, about two-thirds of the 91 members of parliament from Iraqiya walked out in protest, including Allawi. The session continued in their absence and was expected to complete the election of Talabani before adjourning for the night.

Once Talabani is formally confirmed in office, he is to nominate Maliki as prime minister and Maliki will then begin selecting a cabinet, a process expected to continue for several weeks. He faces intense pressure from the US Embassy against any significant role for the Shiite movement of Moqtada al-Sadr, whose support was decisive in breaking the political stalemate of the past eight months.

Besides the issue of repression against former Baathists, Iraqiya is demanding that the National Council on Higher Policy, to be headed by Allawi, should have real powers. Iraqiya officials said they were giving Maliki a month to finalize the role of the council.

Iraqiya won the largest number of votes in the March 7 election, but its 91 seats in parliament are only two more than Maliki's State of Law party. A rival Shiite coalition, the Iraqi National Accord, won 70 seats, of which the Sadrists controlled 40, and a two-party coalition of Kurdish nationalists won another 43.

Neither of the two leading parties had as much as a third of the 325 seats in parliament, and neither could form a coalition government against the other unless supported by both the Sadrists and the Kurdish nationalists.

Politics rather than parliamentary arithmetic was the key barrier, however, with the US government demanding that Allawi, a former CIA asset, be included in any new government, either as prime minister or president, the Sadrists opposing both Allawi and Maliki, and the Iranian government, which exercises considerable influence over all the Shiite parties, backing Maliki.

The protracted deadlock was broken by the Sadrists, who dropped their opposition to Maliki last month and agreed to support a government led by him in return for unspecified concessions in terms of influence, particularly over the Interior Ministry, which controls the police.

Maliki made a tour of neighboring countries—Iran, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, as well as Egypt—seeking to reassure them that his government would restrain Kurdish separatism, seen as a threat in Turkey, Iran and Syria, and make a deal with the Sunni minority, seen as essential by the predominately Sunni countries (all but Iran).

Maliki arrived in Turkey the day after state-run Turkish Petroleum won two lucrative Iraqi government contracts to develop Iraq's natural gas sector. A spokesman for Iraqiya criticized Maliki for combining business deals with soliciting political support.

In the case of Iran, Maliki was seeking to gain approval of the top religious authority, Ayatollah Khamenei, and to cement his deal with Moqtada al-Sadr, who is currently living in the Iranian theological center of Qom.

The only major regional power that Maliki did not visit

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was Saudi Arabia, whose ruling monarchy is viscerally opposed to all the Shiite parties, which it regards as proxies for Iran, its main regional rival.

Allawi also visited most of the neighboring countries to lobby for support—all but Iran—and was rarely seen in the Iraqi capital throughout the eight-month stalemate.

According to the British newspaper *Guardian*, Allawi had decided to allow his party to join the Maliki-led coalition but to keep himself outside the government, until prevailed upon by a personal telephone appeal from US President Barack Obama.

In the final weeks of negotiations, a slew of top-level US officials sought to direct the process, albeit unsuccessfully. Vice President Joseph Biden had telephone conversations with most of the major leaders, and the defeated Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, visited Baghdad with his ally, the right-wing Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman.

Biden, McCain and Lieberman were all lobbying for the Kurdish nationalists to yield the presidency and allow a Sunni Muslim from Allawi's party to take the position. But both two Kurdish parties, that led by President Talabani and that led by the president of the Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani, refused to budge in the face of US entreaties.

Maliki reportedly gave the Kurds a key concession, agreeing to their demand to hold a long-postponed referendum to decide whether the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its surrounding province, Tamim, should be attached to the Kurdish region. Kirkuk's population comprises Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Turkmen, although the influx of Kurds since the US invasion in 2003 may have given the Kurdish nationalists the edge.

Allawi's Iraqiya bloc, which is predominately Sunni, took a much harder line on Kirkuk, and hence had little to offer in return for Kurdish support in parliament. In the end, Barzani boasted, "Each one of us got some of his rights and what he deserves."

The Sunni walkout from parliament Thursday is an indication of the enormous tensions just under the surface, which could well explode into a new round of violent conflict if the parliamentary agreement breaks down.

The last weeks of intensive negotiations were punctuated by a series of sectarian atrocities, including an assault on a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad that left at least 58 people dead, a series of coordinated bombings of targets in the capital that killed 113 people, and attacks on pilgrims visiting the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, which killed 11 and wounded 50 more.

Biden's national security adviser Antony J. Blinken tried to put the best face on the deal, calling it "a significant achievement, the result the Iraqi people voted for and a truly inclusive government" with "significant distribution of powers across the government."

But there was no disguising the failure of US pressure to gain a more prominent position for Allawi's party, with the risk that disaffected Sunnis will again take up arms against both the Shiite-led government and the US occupation forces.

The *Los Angeles Times* called the agreement "a stunning victory" for Maliki and "a strategic defeat for Washington, which had pressed for a prominent role for Maliki's rival, and appeared to be caught flatfooted by the rapid developments."

The Associated Press wrote: "The deal is potentially a setback for the US, which had been pushing for a greater Sunni say in power, and a boost for regional rival Iran."

In an effort to push back, the Obama administration has dropped hints that it will prolong the US military occupation. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said earlier this week that he would welcome a request from the new government in Baghdad for an extension of the December 2011 withdrawal deadline negotiated between Maliki and George W. Bush two years ago.

The real purpose of US imperialism's conquest of Iraq was underscored by the publication Thursday in the *Wall Street Journal* of a lengthy celebration of the oil boom in southern Iraq, centered on the Majnoon and Rumaila fields near Basra.

According to the report, headlined "Iraq's Oil Patch Opens the Spigot," Iraqi officials and oil industry executives expect to meet a 10 percent production increase target at Rumaila this month, three years ahead of schedule. This is the first step in plans to boost Iraq's oil output from 2.5 million barrels a day to 12 million barrels a day this decade.

The *Journal* compared the conditions in southern Iraq to the plundering of oil resources by privatization in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. BP's regional president for Iraq, Michael Townshend, told the newspaper, "If you just add up individually all the fields, it's on a scale of magnitude greater than what anyone has achieved before."

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