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The Complexities of Power Sharing in Iraq

LSE Ideas

By Caelum Moffatt

On 25 November, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani officially invited incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to form a government. According to the Iraqi Constitution, the Shiite leader of the State of Law Coalition (SLC) will now have 30 days to negotiate with the major political blocs and establish an all inclusive cabinet that attempts to break the eight-month political impasse.

In order to render the process as democratic as possible, a points system has been devised whereby available positions within the cabinet are allocated a numerical value depending on their importance. If, as it is speculated, one point is equal to 2.4 parliamentary seats, each political entity will only be permitted to hold positions that its parliamentary share allows. Although every party will be able to nominate candidates for each place, the interior and defence ministries will be reserved for independents and the 'sovereign ministries' – oil, finance and foreign affairs – will be divided between the three major blocs. Once nominations have been submitted, al-Maliki will decide who is appointed.

Members of al-Maliki's inner circle remain optimistic that this method will reap tangible and effective results. However the initiation of the points system does not work to diminish the competition for positions both within and between political blocs as parties assign different meanings to each post.

The sine qua non for success is Iraqiyah, the largest bloc in the Council of Representatives and an alliance that draws most of its support from Iraq's Sunni population. A notable absentee from al-Maliki's inauguration ceremony, Iraqiyah's leader, Iyad Allawi, reiterates that there are three preconditions for compliance: the establishment of a National Council for Strategic Policies (NCSP), chaired by Iraqiyah and awarded executive powers; the recognition of this Council as the centre for promoting national reconciliation; and the exoneration of four Iraqiyah colleagues who were accused by the Accountability and Justice Commission before the elections of being affiliated to Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party.

Iyad Allawi, believing that his coalition has already conceded its constitutional right to form a government, warned that Iraqiyah will not concede on these matters. Despite this explicit threat, al-Maliki, who spent his first term centralising executive powers to his office, publicly opposes bestowing executive authority on the NCSP, insisting that it act purely as an advisory body for foreign, security and domestic affairs.

The implementation of the de-Ba'athification process is also a highly sensitive subject that extends beyond al-Maliki. Iraq may be fraught with sectarian divisions but the Kurdish and Shiite blocs are unanimous in their unequivocal commitment to ensure the removal of remnant Ba'ath loyalists from the political process. Whether links between Iraqiyah and the Ba'ath Party can be substantiated or whether they merely serve as a political expedient to legitimise the marginalisation of Iraqiyah is a discussion that exceeds the remit of this piece. Either way, a political frame that associates Iraqiyah with Saddam Hussein risks damaging the prospects for national reconciliation by widening the chasm between Iraqiyah and the other political blocs, leading to a split that could exacerbate tensions and further destabilise Iraq as disgruntled Sunni militants mobilise in response to this exclusion.

Aside from Iraqiyah, al-Maliki must manage other internal disputes that could undermine any prospective power-sharing agreement and the establishment of a functional government. These include balancing between the dichotomous views of Iraqi nationalists and his Kurdish allies regarding oil and land in the north as well as granting the Sadrists enough influence to satisfy their expectations and reflect the party's standing without considerably enhancing the public profile of the recalcitrant Muqtada al-Sadr.

The removal of Saddam Hussein unleashed the manifestation of an endemic deficiency of trust that plagues Iraqi politics. As a result, al-Maliki has the unenviable task of reaching a compromise between mutually suspicious sectarian elites that viscerally protect their status and vigorously pursue the interests of their respective constituencies.

In a more evolved democracy, Iraqiyah would inevitably sit in opposition, expose the government's shortcomings and construct national policies that aim to supersede sectarian narratives. Unfortunately, in the present climate, such a strategy would enable the Shiites and Kurds to monopolise and consolidate the corridors of power. Additionally, the bonds that unite Iraqiyah may erode as Sunnis become alienated and further disenchanting with politics.

For this reason, Iraq is frequently compared to Lebanon's consociational democracy and predictions foretell the gradual 'Lebanonisation of Iraq'. For now however, sectarianism in Iraq is not as entrenched or institutionalised as it is in Lebanon. Neutralising the impact of sectarianism requires limiting the channels and contexts through which it can be exploited. Power-

sharing is a fundamental step to the development of Iraq's experiment with democracy in presenting an opportunity for cooperation through the composition of a national agenda that assists in building trust amongst its politicians.

Caelum Moffatt is a PhD candidate in Middle East Politics at Durham University, focusing on the politicisation of armed Islamic social movements.

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Silvia L. Peneva, Editor

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