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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Iraq's 2014 Elections: Political Elites Endorsing Confessional Divisions

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | April 2014

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Introduction

Launching a feverish campaign season for the scheduled April 30, 2014 parliamentary elections, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission recently announced the names of 107 coalitions and entities with candidates running for office, along with lists of their candidates. An examination of how these coalitions are composed suggests a fundamental change has taken place in their construction, compared with coalitions that fought the 2010 parliamentary elections. More divided and more sectarian than in the previous election cycle, competition over electoral representation has shifted to the interior of each community, effectively consecrating ever deeper political sectarianism.

The Struggle to Represent Confessional Affiliations

The Iraqi political system, fashioned by the US occupation after the 2003 invasion, aspires to "consensual democracy" via the representation of ethnic identities in the country, and a process of building up political and electoral organizations on the basis of ethnic or confessional affiliation—a process for political and sectarian self-identification imposed upon citizens. Today, for the first time, if one discounts the provincial elections of March 2013, we are witnessing a situation in which each and every ethnic or confessional identity, component of political affiliation, or identity-based coalition is putting forth candidates in the elections, without any single coalition or major electoral block coming to the fore, as has been the case in all previous elections, starting in 2005.

The 2010 elections may have been a milestone in the struggle over the representation of identity. Shiite political factions did not run as a single coalition, as they had done in preceding elections, but as two large coalitions: the State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance. A similar shift occurred with respect to Kurdish political organizations, which entered the elections in two coalitions, the Kurdistan Alliance and the Change Movement (Gorran). The Sunni community, however, fought this election via one large Iraqi Coalition. Fear of this Sunni unanimity led to an eclipse of the phenomenon of subdivision in that it spurred the two main Shiite coalitions to bridge the divide and form, in the aftermath of the elections, the National Alliance—the bloc entrusted with the prime minister's nomination.

The 2010 elections, nevertheless, exhibited diversity in the representation of each communal affiliation and identity. This was similar, albeit in a less pronounced manner, to what is taking place now with the 2014 vote. In contrast, the current elections feature

five major Shiite coalitions (the State of Law Coalition, the Citizen Coalition, the Free Liberals, the Independent Coalition of Elites and Virtue, and the Alliance of National Reform); three major Sunni coalitions (the United for Reform Coalition, the Arab Coalition, and the Dignity Coalition); and four Kurdish coalitions (The Unified, the Change Movement, the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, and the Kurdish Patriotic Alliance).

In countries where political systems are based upon the representation of multiple identities, it is common to see unified blocs develop for each affiliation or identity, but that support the establishment of the state system nonetheless. The struggle for representation of identity takes place at a later stage. The growing divide in Iraq, however, appears part and parcel of a struggle over the construction of a centralized government system, something a country like Iraq cannot quickly emerge from. The scope of the political split within the Shiite community in regards to the formula for extreme political centralization, built up by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki during his eight years of rule, would seem to rule out any possibility of building a more flexible form of centralized governance that would reflect genuine partnership with the other main components of the country's electorate. The Sunni community, for its part, is divided over the shape of the relationship it seeks with a growing centralization that is under Shiite political management.

The Sainte Lague Angle

The growth of this divide has been associated with the adoption of the Sainte Lague Method, a mathematical formula for the distribution of seats among competing candidate lists, utilized by the Iraqi parliament's election law of November 2013 on the basis of which the 2014 elections will be conducted. The Sainte Lague method allows for small entities and coalitions to be included in the electoral process, and accords them reasonable scope on the electoral playing field. Consequently, the large coalitions present on the Iraqi electoral scene created what could be called "shadow entities" as appurtenances subservient to them that would later return to the fold, with any seats they gained to be merged into those of the larger entity. This is what took place in the provincial council elections of 2013, with a substantial number of small entities rising to the fore alongside the larger core coalitions and entities.

In practice, the scope for any small entities playing any effective political role in a political process, such as that of Iraq's, controlled as it is by large and venerable political parties and structures, is minimal as they are bound to join the ranks of the larger organizations.

Parliamentary and provincial elections since 2005 have demonstrated this; the large parliamentary coalitions work to contain any opportunity for the smaller bodies, and to minimize their role as much as possible in future elections, instituting changes to the Sainte Lague method to that end.

Although the Sainte Lague method in its Iraqi adaptation provides for no more than 3 percent of total parliamentary seats to be accorded to small entities, as some studies have shown, the prospect of a loss of even this limited number of seats has continued to vex the larger entities. Most of them have, therefore, resorted to launch their “shadow entities” in order to benefit later on from receiving any seats that these “shadows” may be able to garner in the elections.

Maximizing Electoral Confessionalism / Maximizing Confessional Election

Another prominent feature of the 2014 electoral coalitions is their pronounced confessional or sectarian character. The 2010 elections produced the Iraqi coalition, headed by a secular Shiite Iraqi leader Ayyad Allawi, and it included a substantial number of Shiite Arab members, despite its being a predominantly Sunni coalition—of 91 Iraqi Coalition members elected in 2010, 18 were Shiite Arab Iraqis. The 2014 elections, by contrast, show no such diversity.

Nevertheless, there are three coalitions that may depart from this rule: the National Alliance, headed by Allawi; the Democratic Civil Alliance, a secular alliance with a mix of leftist, nationalist, and liberal associations and personalities; and the Iraq Coalition, funded by businessman Fadil al-Dabbas. These coalitions do not figure prominently on the electoral map, nor are they expected to gain more than a few seats. The Iraq coalition is generally seen as a Sunni Arab coalition, with its main personages and constituents being Sunni Arab and its political presence being strongest in the Sunni provinces. However, it has put forward lists of candidates in all Shiite provinces, and there are a number of prominent Shiite Arab persons who figure in its leadership.

In the elections of 2010, though the two major Shiite electoral coalition blocs did not incorporate any genuine Sunni currents, there were serious negotiations between major Shiite and Sunni groups devoted towards constructing a broad-based coalition during the pre-election period. The State of Law Coalition, then the strongest political coalition after its victory in the 2009 provincial elections, entered into important negotiations along these

lines, although the result at the end of the process was the emergence of a non-inclusive confessional coalition; confessional discourse had the greater power to mobilize the populace.

Indeed, the ease and utility of sectarian mobilization was and remains one of the main factors that has hindered coalition-building along cross-confessional lines. The pronounced confessional climate of the 2014 elections is an expression of a political-communal struggle that has flourished in a transitional period tasked with reconstructing the political system of a country with multiple allegiances and identities, one that is divided ethnically and along sectarian lines.

This divide has prevented any real dialogue among the main coalitions, and was exacerbated by the government formed in the wake of the 2010 elections, which brought to the fore an exclusivist confessional approach to power. Rather than working to mobilize voters for elections and in response to the election results, as a peaceful instrument of handing over power, this government seeks to bend the independent institutions of the state, such as the courts, independent authorities, and the security apparatus, to the ends of its own exclusivist project. It has eliminated any hope that the hesitantly pluralistic shape of the Iraqi Coalition would end up as a purely Sunni coalition, as the majority of its Shiite members have left it to form what is now called "the Shiite Iraqi Coalition," a separate coalition similar to "the Free Iraqi," the "White," and other coalitions.

Thus the map of political forces has been re-drawn, channeling them into trenches that are sharply-delineated along confessional lines. The crisis-fraught formation of the 2010 government did away with the positive atmosphere that had been achieved with the defeat of al-Qaeda and the Shiite militias between 2008 and 2009; in the process, it has strengthened misgivings of both Iraqis and the international community over the mere possibility that a political process could allow for greater participation in governance, or for its progression, even slowly, to come to reflect a bare minimum of democratic principles, rule of law, respect for human rights, and popular participation.

The crisis of government formation in 2010 gave way to the sharp political crises of al-Maliki's second term as prime minister, including the arrest and subsequent death sentence for Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi at the end of 2011; the protest movement in the Sunni provinces following the imprisonment of private security officers for the minister of finance and one of the most prominent political Sunni Arab leaders, Rafi al-Issawi, at the end of 2012; the "Anbar Crisis," which began at the end of 2013 with the

government's declaration of war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Anbar desert.

A Coalition of Multiple Identities

Extreme division and political confessionalization have clearly marked coalitions in the 2014 electoral season, even before the commission announced the names of the coalitions running in the elections. Worse, the major forces have proven unable to forge any consensus regarding the post-election period for the same reasons preventing them from building cross-confessional coalitions. This stands as a serious obstacle to the entire political process.

The major coalitions will, therefore, find that they are bound by the constitutionally set time frame governing the post-election period, particularly with regard to the parliamentary coalition winning the majority of seats, namely that of nominating the prime minister: they must accomplish this without having reached any principled agreement, or advanced any opinion, on the matter. Beyond this, there are no understandings that have been made public regarding the post-election period, apart from that between the Citizen Coalition, led by the Iraqi Higher Islamic Council and headed by Ammar al-Hakim, and the Free Liberals Coalition, led by the Sadrists. There is no serious dialogue or shared understanding regarding the post-election period that could be characterized as crossing confessional lines.

The absence of such understandings may be the product of the absence of clarity regarding the number of coalitions that are running. Even so, the Iraqi political scene will remain governed by the major political organizations and parties who have dominated it since 2003; there has been no newcomer to the scene who is capable of proposing real alternatives. The birth of the Change Movement (Gorran) in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2008 confirms that new political entities must be nurtured in the womb of existing venerable political structures, even those with, or seeking, an opposition role. Consequently, the same players remain on the political scene, though their relative rates of representation may change, reflecting an increasing or decreasing number of seats.

The fundamental ambiguity seen on the Arab Sunni political stage, which appears to be very volatile and unstable, is due to its relative newness as an arena for Sunni political campaigning. This is in contrast with the Kurdish and Shiite political scenes, which matured in opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime and developed clear political traditions that have enabled them to master the map of their coalition voters. They can assess the

scope and areas of influence for every political entity that is affiliated with them, whereas this is not easily achieved in the Arab Sunni political space in Iraq.

The post-election alliances will be determined by the stance taken toward both the central government and centralization. There are two essential conceptions at play. First, there is a strong centralizing state led by Arab Shiites, alongside Kurdish participation, with each group seeking a limited but effective degree of political de-centralization. Secondly, a versatile centralization seeks to balance a broad decentralization with a more flexible central authority that involves all governance components in developing restraints or political institutions that can act to prevent any form of monopoly of power, similar to al-Maliki's later period of rule. This would require replacing al-Maliki with another candidate, though this person would be subject to Iran's approval.

The first of the above two conceptions is seen in the State of Law Coalition and the second in the Shiite's opposition to al-Maliki, namely the Citizen and the Free Liberal Coalitions. Shiite political circles represented in these two large opposition factions will effectively form the nucleus of the post-election coalitions.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion, Iraq adopted the model of consensual democracy, a system which theorists of political systems consider to be appropriate for societies that are divided or that have multiple identities that have not been successfully merged into a single nation. However, theorists have not considered consensual confessionalism (or sectarianism) a condition that seems particular to the Arab Mashreq, nor has it transformed into democracy in any Arab state.

The theorists state that the pillar of consensual democracy is a "broad coalition"—a coalition that includes forces that express the views of the whole range of major community affiliations and allegiances that make up a country. In successful non-western examples of consensual democracy, such as Malaysia, this coalition constitutes the foundation of the political structure. This is something not seen in Iraq since 2003, when the opposite has occurred: a foreign occupation imposed a consensual confessionalism upon a population that was not divided along confessional lines, and became an instrument of exclusion and in-fighting.

The 2014 elections have not manifested any attempt to overcome this situation or build a cross-confessional coalition through real and serious dialogue among political entities

and coalitions that have remained preoccupied with division and in-fighting, to such an extent post-election possibilities have not even been discussed. We find ourselves confronting a reality in which the most basic mutual understandings among political partners throughout the nation are absent, or drowned out by the sounds of violence and calls to arms.