

Iraq: the Long Road to a Government

Musab Alkateeb

Ten weeks after the January 30 elections, Iraqis have chosen a Kurdish president, Shiite and Sunni vice presidents, a Sunni speaker and Shiite deputy speaker of parliament, and now a Shiite prime minister. Why has it taken so long to form the new government?

The vote counting process and the parties' right to contest results and seek recounts consumed the first two weeks after the election. As early results were leaked to the press, Iraqis rejoiced in their first act of collective citizenship to set Iraq's democracy on a sound footing—or so they thought.

The last two weeks of February were characterized by behind-the-scenes squabbling and political bargaining among the member coalitions comprising the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). This internal horse-trading naturally centered on which positions within the new government would be offered and to whom. UIA leaders also traveled to Kurdistan for detailed talks beginning in early March, negotiations that lasted approximately a month.

The process of government formation has been guided—and also complicated—by the Transitional Administration Law (TAL), which requires a two-thirds majority in the elected assembly to form a government. Shiite Ayatollah Sistani tacitly approved the TAL, despite his objection to the provision giving Kurds an effective veto. Sistani knew that the political reality of Iraq would not allow for anything but a power-sharing arrangement among the major ethnic groups. Had the UIA formed a Shiite-only government based on a simple majority, the fears of Iraq's Arab neighbors would have been quickly realized, dooming the government from the start.

Due to the TAL, the Kurds now enjoy a position on the Iraqi political landscape far beyond their numbers. The Kurds persuaded U.S. officials that they were the secular antidote to a Shiite-dominated Iraq, thereby clearing the way to further Kurdish territorial and political ambitions at a time when Iraq is at its weakest. The Kurdish leadership cemented its claim to oil-rich Kirkuk by resettling Kurdish refugees in and around Kirkuk's public places such as soccer stadiums, mosques, and refugee camps. In addition to their participation in Iraq's interim governments to date, the Kurds maintain a separate government in Iraq's northern provinces, which makes no effort to coordinate its actions or policies with the central government. Kurds also maintain armed forces (Peshmerga) that are distinct and separate from the Iraqi armed forces, despite de facto control by the Kurds over the Ministry of Defense.

In contrast to the Kurds, Sunni Arabs have managed poorly their role in the politics of post-war Iraq. Sunni politicians and population have now painfully realized the cost of their abstinence from the election process, as shown by a recent demonstration in the Sunni stronghold of Tikrit demanding (in vain) the appointment of independent Sunni MP Mishaan Al Jibouri as speaker of the National Assembly.

The dearth of Sunni representatives in the National Assembly complicated the eventual choice of Hashem Al Hassani as speaker. There are 17 Sunni representatives in all, six of whom are part of the UIA. While Sunni politicians jostled for the speaker position, political developments in the wider Sunni populations were afoot. It is now clear that Sunni leadership is split into two main camps, one wishing to take an active role in Iraqi politics and another making its involvement conditional upon the withdrawal of U.S. troops and thereby espousing the methods of the insurgency. This rift may represent a positive trend among some of Iraq's Sunni Arabs, as they break with those who actively seek to destroy Iraq's nascent democracy.

After examining why it has taken so long to form a government, one can now see ongoing implications for Iraqi politics. U.S. officials have made it clear that an Islamist Iraq is no reward for the United States' sacrifice, a position that ironically may cause irreversible harm to the creation of the very Iraqi democracy for which hundreds of Americans gave their lives. The same factors, including the TAL, that complicated government formation by seeking to avoid domination of Iraqi politics by the Shiite majority now cast a long shadow over the process of writing an Iraqi constitution, due to begin once Iraqis clear the next hurdle of cabinet formation.

Musab Alkateeb is a former Deputy Minister of Trade in the Interim Iraqi Government.