

Sectarian animosity still prevails

With little sign of a genuine cross-sectarian consensus, Iraq's fledgling democracy remains frighteningly fragile.

MORE than three months after a general election, Iraq's new parliament met for the first time on June 14th—but still with no new government in sight. The post of prime minister remains up for grabs, and no one knows who will get it. So the time-wasting hiatus that has kept the country adrift since the general election on March 7th could stretch for several more nerve-jangling months.

During this time, no new laws have been passed, no new national vision enunciated. Violence, though far less bloody than three years ago, has risen again. Worst of all, Iraq's ethno-sectarian divisions seem as deep as ever. No Iraqi equipped to appeal across them looks likely to emerge as prime minister. Indeed, though a party strongly backed by the Sunni Arab minority narrowly won the most votes and seats in the March election, the two biggest mainly Shia alliances, which came second and third, have agreed to gang up in a wider front to form a ruling coalition in which the Sunnis may not play much of a part. Since the two mainly Shia alliances teamed up only recently, it is unclear whether the constitution should treat them as the election winners and give them first shot at forming a government.

It is clear, in any event, that Nuri al-Maliki, the incumbent caretaker prime minister, whose original alliance came second, is determined to keep his job, though he is reviled as sectarian by Iraq's Sunni minority and by the leaders of influential neighbouring Sunni-led countries, especially Saudi Arabia. That would be outrageous, says Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia whose Sunni-backed Iraqiya alliance won 91 seats out of parliament's 325 to Mr Maliki's 89. He insists that he should have first try at forming a governing coalition.

Astonishingly, only on June 12th did the two rivals meet for the first time since the election (pictured above, Mr Maliki on the right). The day before, a Saudi newspaper published in London said a plot had recently been hatched by "local and regional parties" to assassinate Mr Allawi to prevent him from winning the top post.

The upshot is that neither rival may get it, and a compromise figure, almost certainly another Shia, may have to be tapped. Mr Maliki's broader new Shia front now includes the party of Muqtada al-Sadr, a fiery populist, as well as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, led by Ammar al-Hakim, which is deemed the cosiest of all Iraqi parties with Iran. The new super-alliance would still not quite have a majority in parliament but would do so if it cut a deal with the Kurdish alliance. Mr Allawi and his Sunni backers could thus be left out, filling a seething cauldron of resentment.

"Any government without Iyad Allawi would be a disaster for Iraq, especially for its security," says Muwafaq al-Rubaie, a former national-security adviser under Mr Maliki. The Sunni insurgency that still persists would get a fillip. Virtually all prominent politicians across the spectrum say that all four of the main alliances—Mr Allawi's Iraqiya, Mr Maliki's State of Law group, the Iraqi National Alliance in which Mr Sadr's people predominate, and the Kurds—should come together, each well represented in a grand coalition.

But the animosity between Sunni and Shia Arabs means it is still uncertain that Mr Allawi will get a senior job, let alone the prime minister's. Iraqi Shias still feel, after a millennium of being treated as lowlier than the Sunnis despite being a majority, that they deserve the political cake unshared. "They far prefer dealing with a harassing [Sunni] insurgency than with what they see as a lethal fifth column embedded within the state apparatus", writes Joost Hiltermann of International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution outfit.

For their part, most Sunni Arabs, who ran the show under Saddam Hussein, doggedly refuse even to admit that they are a numerical minority. There has been no full census since 1987 and precise sectarian data have been unavailable for even longer. But most independent pundits reckon Shia Arabs make up more than half the population, Sunni Arabs less than a quarter, Kurds (most of whom are Sunni) around a fifth, while Turkomans, Christians and others make up the rest.

Most Sunni politicians, as well as Mr Allawi, blame Iran for meddling. Many rank-and-file Sunni Iraqis refer to the Shia-led government simply as "the Persians". In conversation it is often mentioned that the two main Shia groups hastened to Tehran, Iran's capital, for consultation immediately after the election, as did the Kurds.

A prominent Sunni preacher in west Baghdad, Zakariah al-Tamimi, who as a member of Mr Allawi's party stood unsuccessfully in the election, says Iran "is waging a war to colonise Iraq..America destroyed Iraq and handed it to Iran." Behind such dastardly plans there is, he says, an American-Iranian-Israeli plot. He smilingly quotes a Hadith (a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) that warns against an "impostor from the west who will be followed by 70,000 Jews from [the Persian city of] Isfahan." A recent spate of bombs in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, presumed by independent observers to be the work of Sunni insurgents, some of them linked to al-Qaeda, had "obviously been planted by Iran." Such theories may be dismissed as ludicrous, but they are widely believed.

Suspicious among Iraq's diminished Sunnis of an Iranian plot to do them down are no less strongly held by influential Arabs in the Gulf. They often point out that Mr Sadr, the most powerful of Iraqi Shia populists, is still living in Iran's holy city of Qom. The Iraqi Shias' ageing but still pre-eminent grand ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani, is—it is widely noted by Sunnis—of Persian origin, and speaks Arabic with a Persian accent. As for Mr Maliki, he is "pure Persian, completely Persian," insists the editor of a leading Gulf newspaper. At a recent conference organised by the Al Jazeera television channel in Qatar to discuss peacemaking in the region, many of the Sunni participants referred admiringly to Iraq's insurgents as "the resistance", even though its targets these days are almost entirely fellow Iraqis rather than American occupiers.

A visit to the city of Fallujah, an hour's drive west of Baghdad, confirms the intensity of Sunni provincial hostility to Iraq's new Shia-led establishment. A clutch of city councillors, albeit chosen in 2005 under American tutelage, insists that "life was much better" under Saddam Hussein, a refrain often heard among Sunnis across Iraq. The people of Fallujah, a fiercely Sunni town, will "never forgive the Americans", say the councillors, for the ferocity of their two assaults on the city in 2004, after jihadists had taken it over. The city's supply of electricity, they say, is still less than three hours a day. For such misfortunes they blame the Shias who now run Iraq from Baghdad, rubbishing them as Iranian stooges as well as crooks.

Iraqi Shias still tend to see Saddam's old Baathists around every corner, deviously preparing for a comeback, especially as former senior soldiers, who are Sunni, have been returning to the upper ranks of the army to provide some professional experience. Hence Mr Maliki's vote-catching pandering, just before the election, to Shia demands to bar several hundred candidates accused of having a Baathist past.



Many Shias are irked by Mr Allawi's frequent visits, since the election, to the capitals of Arab countries, all of them governed by Sunnis, to rally support for his prime ministerial bid. Iraq's Shias tend to harbour a special mistrust for the Saudis. "They are fanatics who don't allow Shia mosques to be built on their own soil," says a leading Iraqi banker. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are often accused of providing cash for the insurgents. Many Iraqi Shias, including Mr Maliki, also blame the secular Baathists who run next-door Syria for backing Iraq's insurgents. Indeed, Mr Rubaie, the former national-security adviser, discerns a malign merger of jihadist and Baathist Sunnis: "Generals with beards", he calls them. "Regional powers have plotted against us," he adds.

Nothing like back to normal

As for the Kurds, whose autonomous region is the safest and most go-ahead bit of Iraq, they are cordially distrusted by most Arabs, Shias and Sunnis alike, who often claim they are trying to dismember the country at the behest of foreign powers. It is exceedingly rare to hear an Arab Iraqi express sympathy for Kurdish aspirations, or for the suffering they experienced under Saddam Hussein. And many Kurds, to be fair, do indeed give the impression of not wanting to be part of Iraq forever.

Amid such rumour-mongering and mistrust, Iraq is probably doomed to be politically stuck. It is a lot safer than it was two or three years ago, but it is still much too dangerous for most would-be investors to do business in a normal way. The oil companies and a handful of foreign banks think it worth setting up in Baghdad: they can afford to hire thousands of security men, most of them foreign—Peruvians, Ugandans, New Zealanders, South Africans, among others—to protect their staff. Businessmen with more modest resources cannot contemplate this.

Security requirements snag everything. Fallujah, with a claimed population of 600,000-plus, still prevents cars from other places from entering without special permission, allowing access only through eight designated entry points. Curfews in Baghdad and elsewhere persist. The capital is punctuated by some 1,500 checkpoints. Even short journeys can entail long delays. Concrete blast-walls are ubiquitous. In the first flush of freedom as the American troops withdrew from the cities a year ago, the government started to pull some of the walls down.

But when sectarian violence and bombings instantly resumed, they went back up again. Side roads leading to arterial roads are still nearly all blocked off.

To visit parliament or various administrative buildings in Baghdad's still heavily cocooned Green Zone, you need a special badge to come by car, and must then pass through a tedious labyrinth of rigorous checks: off with your shoes and belt, out with the battery of your mobile phone, put your hands up, have your body radar-scanned, put all your items from your briefcase in cages for dogs to sniff. In temperatures above 40°C this can take an hour, as you walk from one hut or receptacle to another, even if the queues are small. A member of parliament explains that he is entitled to 30 bodyguards on the state payroll, handpicked from the police or army, invariably by dint of tribal or sectarian affiliation.

Though political violence is down almost tenfold from three years ago, the number of civilians being killed in political violence is probably still higher than in Afghanistan. Last month, according to hospital, police and army sources, 337 people, including 275 civilians, are known to have been killed, against 328 the month before. That compares with more than 3,000 a month in the worst periods of 2006 and 2007. But Baghdad hardly feels relaxed.



The insurgents now seem to concentrate on spectacular bombings of landmark targets, such as ministries and hotels. Since last August there have been at least five big waves of coordinated attacks, hitting the finance and foreign ministries, among others, three of the city's best-known hotels, plus softer targets such as mosques and market-places in Shia districts. Last month more than 100 people were killed in a single day in a score of bombings across the country. On June 13th jihadists in military uniforms stormed the central bank in Baghdad, killing 15 people. In the past year at least 3,000 civilians have perished in politically motivated attacks.

The insurgents also kill fellow Sunnis, especially those who have signed up to the "awakening councils" who have accommodated themselves, however reluctantly, with the new Shia-led order. On June 7th, for instance, a series of bombs went off in the Sunni province of Anbar, west of Baghdad. The targets were policemen and tribal leaders who have turned against al-Qaeda. Several Sunni imams who speak out against al-Qaeda have recently been shot dead. One was beheaded.

Against this backdrop, it is vital that the new parliament and the government that it eventually endorses builds as wide a cross-sectarian consensus as possible. Mr Allawi sought to do just that. Mr Maliki also won cross-sectarian plaudits in provincial elections last year, after he had sent in the army to hammer fellow Shias in the Sadrist militias, who had tormented the southern city of Basra. But since then the country seems to have slipped back into more

sectarian ways. "Everyone has retreated to his own corner—to his own dungeon, if you like," says Mr Rubaie.

He and other leading politicians worry that the army may re-emerge as a political arbiter, as it has done repeatedly during Iraq's past nine decades as a state. "There is still the risk of a coup," says a minister close to Mr Maliki. Mr Rubaie says that the armed forces are "still infiltrated by extremists who are against the political process and have the mindset of the good old days of Saddam Hussein."

Mr Maliki has sought to make Iraq "coup-proof". But another prime minister might struggle to consolidate civilian control over the armed forces. Party militias, bound by sectarian loyalties, could yet re-emerge. Many Iraqis still fear that, once the ministries are allotted to the various parties in a new coalition government, they will again become party fiefs defended by militias that have, in the past, behaved murderously. Some fear that if that happens a military strongman could yet be tempted to intervene. Others think a civilian government could be tempted to carry out a "constitutional coup", empowering itself with emergency laws that could erode Iraq's fledgling democracy. In any event, it is still possible, especially if no overarching leader manages to close the fundamental Sunni-Shia rift, that the country could become a corrupt, authoritarian, oil-and-security state, a semi-democracy at best.

"Some people don't believe in reconciliation—they're just keen to settle scores and break the back of the other side," says Mr Rubaie. "We're learning. I honestly believe proportional-representation democracy is here to stay," he says. "But 'compromise' is still a dirty word in Arabic."

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