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IRAQ TOWARDS 2014 ELECTIONS: A SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Andrea Plebani



The paper aims to delineate the evolution of the Iraqi socio-political scenario after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the end of the Coalition Provisional Authority experience. In doing so the research attempts to pinpoint key actors in the Iraqi political system and the degree of popular support they were able to muster both on the local (2005, 2010 and 2013 provincial elections) and national (January -December 2005 and 2010 voting) levels. The final part of the paper examines the political dynamics that emerged during al-Maliki's second term. Particular attention has been given to the heightening political infighting seen since the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011 and to the apparent fragmentation of the Iraqi political arena attested to by the results of the recent provincial elections.

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Ten years after the fall of Saddam's regime, Iraq is still entangled in a difficult reconstruction process which, while presenting opportunities and promises, has to cope with a series of daunting challenges threatening the very future of the country as a coherent and unified state.

In the past decade the "new Iraq" underwent one of the bloodiest civil wars of the new century while laying the foundations for creation of a democratic system that – all its problems notwithstanding – staged 6 elections in 8 years. Despite a persistent lack of basic services and meagre enterprise in the private sector, the country witnessed an economic growth which, thanks to its bolstering of the hydrocarbon sector, is poised to transform it into one of the fastest-developing economies in the world. Baghdad also succeeded in regaining its formal independence with the completion of US troop withdrawal in December 2011, its "return" to the regional and the international arena marked by the organization of high level meetings (like the Arab League Summit of March 2012 and the double-round talks on the Iranian nuclear issue), its removal from Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, the restoration of formal ties with its neighbours and the significant (albeit not complete) curtailing of their meddling in Iraqi affairs.

Unfortunately, despite these important results, the recent history of the "land of the two rivers" has underlined the existence of multiple threats that could derail the reconstruction process begun in 2003. While the current levels of violence cannot be compared with those seen during the peaks of the conflict, the attacks staged by al-Qaeda in Iraq and flare-ups of the insurgency made July 2013 the bloodiest month in the country since 2008. In spite of the progress made by Iraqi security forces (ISF), they seem unable to prevent the escalation of violence and continue to be marred by significant internal divisions. At the same time, the economy continues to be dominated by state-owned companies and by the oil sector, with private Iraqi enterprises unable to compete with foreign firms even in the agricultural sector. This situation not only makes the Iraqi economy highly dependent on hydrocarbon resources but also contributes to high unemployment rates mitigated only by the direct intervention of the central government. And, finally, there are problems with Iraqi political institutions, whose effectiveness has been severely paralysed by the continuous infighting of its main socio-political actors as well as by the effects of the regional Saudi-Iranian-Turkish competition.

In this framework, the Iraqi political system is extensively viewed as both the problem and the main hope of the country. While widely accused of most of the hardships afflicting the country, it is only inside the Iraqi political arena that the challenges the Iraqi people have to face can be addressed without reverting to indiscriminate violence and instability. A few months before the political elections scheduled for 2014, this paper

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aims to focus on the role and the dynamics of the Iraqi political scenario, trying to delineate its main actors as well as the most significant passages it went through after 2005 (the “electoral year”, with 3 national elections taking place).

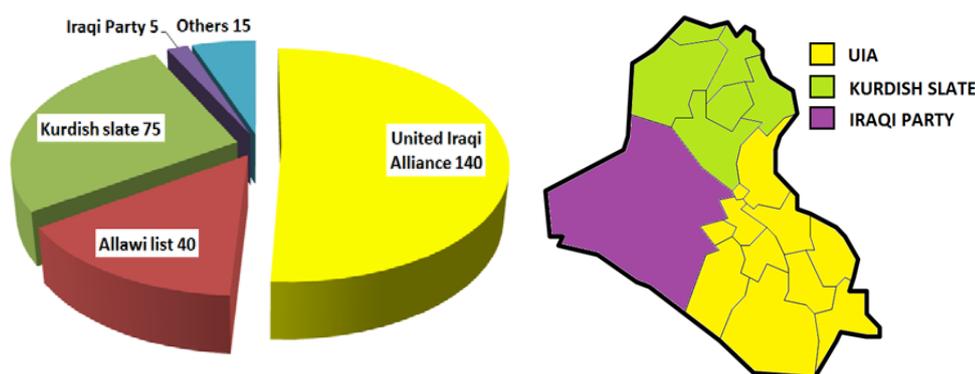
1. The “electoral year” and the Jafaari mandate

The January 2005 national and provincial elections were the first free votes held in Iraq in decades. Despite the threats launched by the insurgency and the boycott of most of the Arab Sunni community, more than 8.5 million Iraqi citizens cast their votes to elect an interim national assembly charged with drafting the constitution and to choose their representatives at the provincial level.

The results underlined the Iraqi political system’s preponderance of alliances based on overt ethno-sectarian allegiances, assigning the victory to a sort of Kurdish-Arab Shia “ticket” uniting the Shia-backed United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)¹ with a “Kurdish bloc”². On the national level the UIA obtained 140 delegates, the Kurdish slate 75, while the secular (and anti-sectarian) list led by the Shiite politician (and interim prime minister) Iyad Allawi gained only 40 seats, despite significant backing by Washington. The only Arab Sunni party taking part in the national elections, the Iraqi Party of shaykh Ghazi al-Yawar, obtained 5 seats, reflecting the decision of most of the community to boycott an election considered just a means to legitimate an unlawful and overtly anti-Sunni regime.

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Figure 1 - National and provincial elections – January 2005.



¹ The UIA was the direct result of the cooperation of a wide array of Shia political forces comprising the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the followers of the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the historical (albeit weak) Dawa party and the Basra-centred Fadhila list.

² The Kurdish bloc was mainly built around the alliance between the two main northern parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Masud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani.

The voting for the provincial councils replicated the dynamics shown nationwide. In the south and in the centre the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) emerged as the main winner, obtaining the absolute majority in 5 provinces and participating in coalition governments in other 4. The Sadrists, while not controlling any governorates, fared well, as did Fadhila which won in Basra. The Dawa party, despite its significant history, proved to be one of the lesser parties of the coalition. In the north, the Kurdish slate won (as expected) in the 3 Kurdish provinces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and was also able to assert its control over the largely Sunni majority provinces of Niniveh, Diyala and Salah al-Din and on the strategic governorate of Tamim/Kirkuk³. Despite the few votes cast in Sunni majority areas, the Islamic Iraqi Party (IIP) succeeded in controlling al-Anbar, the western province that would soon become widely associated with the insurgency.

The influence that ethno-sectarian equilibriums exerted on the Iraqi system was further exacerbated by the criteria adopted to apportion key institutional positions: Ibrahim al-Jafaari, a Shiite politician belonging to the Dawa party, was nominated Prime Minister (by far the most important position in the new Iraqi institutional architecture); the presidency of the republic was assigned to the Kurdish (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani; while the Arab Sunni Hajim al-Hassani became speaker of Parliament. Similar criteria were used to select the various ministerial positions.

The constitution drafted by the constituent assembly was approved by a referendum held in October. Contrary to the January elections, the Sunni community turned out en masse in the hope of derailing a constitutional process denounced as flawed: the “no vote” obtained 97% of the preferences in al-Anbar, 82% in Salah al-Din, 55% in Niniveh and 44% in Diyala⁴. Despite these efforts, the opposition front was unable to block approval of the document, which would have required a “no vote” of two thirds of the voters in at least three provinces. While defeated, participation in the referendum marked the re-entry of the Sunni community into the political arena in spite of its undeniable support for the more extremist wings of the insurgency.

The elections held in December confirmed the tendencies registered in the previous ballots, with an even more evident polarization of the vote along ethno-sectarian lines. The Shia alliance (UIA) obtained 128 seats (even if SCIRI lost part of its support in favour of the Sadrists), the Kurdish list 53,

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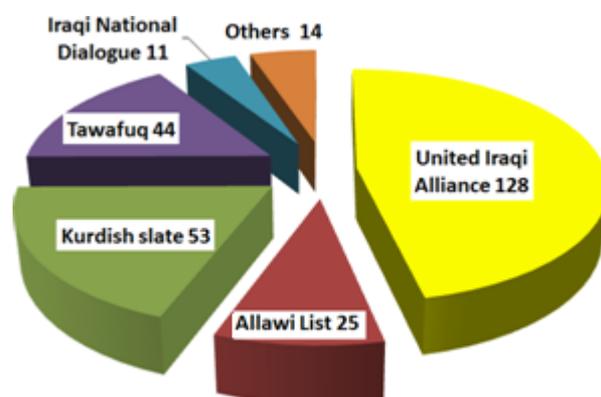
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³ International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: resolving the Kirkuk crisis*, «Middle East Report», n. 64, 19 April 2007, p. 15, <http://www.setav.org/ups/dosya/10280.pdf>.

⁴ E. HERRING – G. RANGWALA, *Iraq in fragments. The occupation and its legacy*, Cornell University Press & C. Hurst, 2006, p. 287.

while most of Sunni support was given to *Tawafuq* (44 seats) and the *Iraqi National Dialogue* (11). The secular and anti-sectarian list of Iyad Allawi obtained only 25 seats. As observed by Dawisha and Diamond: “the extent of the ethno-sectarian character of the vote is better observed when voting is broken down at the provincial level. [...] The UIA dominated the voting in the nine Southern Shi’ite provinces, winning 70 of the 81 district seats. The [...] Kurdish lists [...] together won all the 35 seats in Kurdistan. And the Sunni lists won 15 of the 17 seats in the predominately Sunni Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces”⁵.

Figure 2 - December 2005 elections: seats and main political actors⁶.



The election confirmed the minority status of the Sunni community as well as the virtual division of the Iraqi electorate into three major blocs partially reflecting the country’s ethno-sectarian dynamics (an element which would later prompt a wide array of calls for a “soft” versus “hard” partitioning of the country) but also the fact that no political force could have ruled the country alone.

While al-Jafaari was confirmed as Prime Minister, his new tenure was marred by growing internal instability, scandals and political infighting, as well as by the explosion of civil war (officially sparked by the February 2006 attacks against the Shiite al-Askari shrine of Samarra).

Furthermore, al-Jafaari’s close relations with Tehran contributed to weakening his position towards Washington, *de facto* depriving him of the backing of the most important external player in Iraq. After a prolonged crisis, al-Jafaari had to resign and his seat was taken by another Dawa leader: Nuri al-Maliki. Again the premiership was assigned to a politician

⁵ A. DAWISHA – L.J. DIAMOND, *Iraq’s year of living dangerously*, «Journal of Democracy», vol. 7, no. 2, April 2006, p. 96-100.

⁶ K. KATZMAN, *Iraq: politics, governance and human rights*, Congressional Research Service Report, 30 September 2011, p. 36, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf>.

belonging to one of the lesser parties of the Shiite coalition, a compromise resting on the assumption that al-Maliki's weak position would make him responsive to the influence of his allies as well as on the fact that this choice would not alter the fragile equilibriums ruling the UIA. The following years would prove how wrong both assumptions were.

2. Al-Maliki's first tenure: 2006-2010

Despite the pressure exerted by his allies and the manifest worsening of the Iraqi security scenario between 2006 and 2007, the new Prime Minister succeeded in consolidating his position, demonstrating an unsuspected ability to forge ad hoc alliances and to place key allies in strategic political, economic and security positions. Furthermore, his strong personality, coupled with his formal equidistance between Iranian and American interests⁷ and his apparent opposition to the ethno-sectarian dynamics that came to dominate the country, allowed him to obtain the support of growing portions of the population⁸. In this framework, the Prime Minister was able to capitalize not only on the slow but gradual improvement of the security conditions registered in 2008, but also on the agreements reached with the United States (Status of Forces Agreement and Strategic Framework Agreement) and on the gradual integration of the militias into the Iraqi security forces. Al-Maliki's national status (at least among the Arab component of the population) was further strengthened by his vocal opposition to Kurdish claims to the disputed areas⁹ as well as by the military operations he launched in the first half of 2008 against the Mahdi Army (the military wing of the Sadrist movement) in Basra and in Baghdad. While the ISF had to rely on the external (and fundamental) support of US troops, the attacks ordered by the prime minister against one of its main Shia allies (accused of fostering sectarian violence and engaging in mafia-style practices) were read as a clear demonstration of his anti-sectarian agenda and of his will to strengthen weakened (but still strong) Iraqi nationalist sentiment.

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⁷ N. PARKER, *Macchiavelli in Mesopotamia. Nouri al-Maliki builds the body politic*, «World Policy Journal», Spring 2009.

⁸ K. POLLACK, *The battle for Baghdad*, «The National Interest», September-October 2009, p. 2.

⁹ The term refers to a wide belt of territories stretching along the KRG borders claimed both by Baghdad and by Erbil. Their significant geopolitical weight has contributed to spark a dispute that 10 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein regime is still far from being solved. See S. KANE, *Iraq's Disputed Territories*, USIP Peaceworks, n. 609, March 2011 and International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, «Middle East Report», n. 88, July 2009.

delicate equilibriums on which the fragile Iraqi political system rested. At the “Shia level”¹⁰, the ascendance of the Prime Minister was considered a serious threat by the other major parties, which also had to face mounting popular anger stemming from the poor management of the governorates they controlled. These assumptions, coupled with the explosion of latent rivalries and the emergence of significant political divergences among the UIA parties, led to the disbandment of the United Iraqi Alliance, with al-Maliki deciding to run alone under the banner of a nationalist and anti-sectarian political platform called Dawlat al-Qanun (State of Law). At the “Sunni level”, the community’s difficulties in coming to terms with the “new Iraq” were reflected by its deep fragmentation and by the formation of a series of parties with conflicting agendas¹¹. The delicate situation of the community was brilliantly described by Ofra Bengio: “Unlike the Kurds and the Shi’a, [the Sunnis] have immense difficulties identifying themselves under the Sunni label, as doing so would likely yield the following results: it would underscore their numerical weaknesses in comparison to the Shi’a, damage their reputation as the fervent adherents and representatives of supra-Iraqi unity, and perpetuate the sectarian-based allotment of power – which is detrimental to their interests. [...] Unlike the Kurds and the Shi’a, who established underground organizations and opposition parties over the years, the Sunnis did not, since the regime was identified with the Sunnis and represented their interests. Consequently the Sunnis’ weakness has been exacerbated sevenfold: their power base was eradicated and they have not forged alternative political organizations with a coherent orientation or clear objectives”¹². Although on a scale not comparable with the other main Iraqi communities, even the Kurds had to endure a certain level of fragmentation, with the Goran list challenging the dominant position of the KDP and of the PUK.

The 2009 elections resulted in a landslide victory for al-Maliki who obtained the majority of the votes in 10 governorates (including Baghdad and Basra) and significant results even in non-Shia majority provinces. While the Sadrist limited their defeat, the SCIRI (renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq – ISCI) lost control of all the 9 provinces

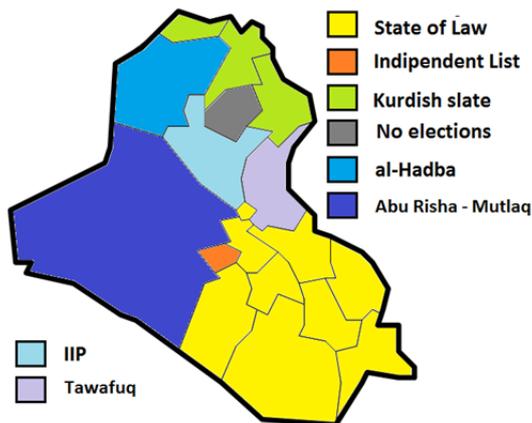
¹⁰ This sort of sectarian-driven theoretical framework has been adopted for clarity’s sake only, due to the extremely complex dynamics dominating the Iraqi scenario. In no way this choice wants to endorse any tripartite vision of the country assuming the existence of 3 main ethno-sectarian communities mustering irreconcilable conflicting agendas.

¹¹ Amongst them: Tawafuq, the list headed by Saleh al-Mutlaq, the Iraqi Islamic Party of Tariq al-Hashimi, the *sahwa* list of of shaykh Abu Risha and the al-Hadba slate led by al-Nujaifi. See D. SERWER – S. PARKER, *Maliki’s Iraq between two elections*, United States Institute of Peace Briefing, May 2009, p. 4-7, <http://www.usip.org/publications/malikis-iraq-between-two-elections>.

¹² O. BENGIO, *Iraq’s new political elites: a dream come true?*, «Global Research in International Affairs», vol. 13, no. 4, December 2009, p. 5.

it had ruled since 2005 and even Fadhila was severely defeated in Basra. The vote also confirmed the deep fragmentation of the Arab Sunni community, with al-Hadba obtaining control of Niniveh, Tawafuq winning in Diyala, al-Anbar ruled by the alliance between Abu Risha and Saleh al-Mutlaq, and confirmation of the Islamic Iraqi Party in Salah al-Din. In the KRG, instead, the KDP-PUK alliance remained the main political force with 59 seats, but the 26 representatives elected on the Goran slate revealed a significant change in the northern political scenario¹³.

Figure 3 - January 2009 Provincial elections.



Aside from the results of the individual parties, the provincial elections stressed the significant fluidity of the Iraqi political system. In particular, they proved that sectarian loyalties, while important, could not shield the political parties from popular dissatisfaction (and this was the message the ballot boxes clearly sent ISCI and Fadhila¹⁴). Furthermore, the State of Law victory underlined the strong appeal still exerted by Iraqi nationalism and growing popular opposition to rigid ethno-sectarian policies and agendas. Finally, the voting confirmed the heightened status of the Prime Minister, whose position was now legitimated not only by support from reluctant political allies but also by the popular vote.

These considerations deeply influenced the Iraqi political scenario preceding the national elections of March 2010. The victory obtained by al-Maliki in 2009 spurred most of his competitors in the Shia community to join a new coalition called the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). In order to

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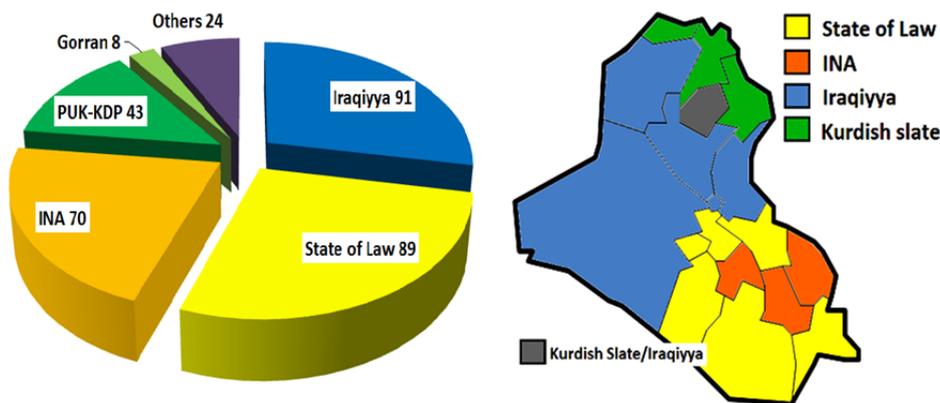
¹³ M. KNIGHTS, *National implications of the Kurdish elections in Iraq*, Sada-analysis on Arab Reform, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/09/09/national-implications-of-kurdish-elections-in-iraq/6dz4>.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's provincial elections: the stakes*, «Middle East Report», no. 82, January 2009, pp. 9-10.

dilute its sectarian nature, the platform included not only ISCI, the Sadrists and Fadhila, but also a wide range of Arab Sunni and Shia leaders, like the former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari and the old US protégé Ahmed Chalabi. On the other hand, the deep fragmentation of the Arab Sunni political spectrum was partially overcome with formation of the Iraqiyya slate led by the former prime minister (of Shia descent) Iyad Allawi. The coalition was based on an overtly anti-sectarian platform and aimed at exploiting the strong nationalist sentiments still harboured by the Iraqi people especially in the capital and in Sunni-majority areas, as attested to by the support given the movement by key Arab Sunni leaders like Saleh al-Mutlaq, Tariq Al-Hashimi and Usama al-Nujaifi¹⁵. Even in the north, KDP, PUK and Goran joined forces to maximize their influence on the national level, as happened in 2005.

Despite the apparent re-orientation of the Iraqi political system along anti-sectarian and nationalist lines, the results of the 2010 elections underlined the resilience of these primordial linkages: Iraqiyya, which surprisingly became the leading Iraqi party with 91 seats, mustered most of its support from Arab Sunni-majority areas and in the capital, while the “Shia vote” was divided between al-Maliki’s State of Law (89 seats) and INA (70 seats). In the north, the KDP-PUK-Goran could count on the support of most of the KRG population.

Figure 4 - March 2010 national elections¹⁶



The post-2010 Iraqi political landscape thus proved to be dominated by 4 major political blocs: Iraqiyya, State of Law, INA and the Kurdish slate

The post-2010 Iraqi political landscape thus proved to be dominated by 4 major political blocs: *Iraqiyya*, State of Law, INA and the Kurdish slate. The unexpected affirmation of Iraqiyya represented an existential threat to the control over Iraqi institutions the main Shia stakeholders had held

15 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Iraqi Elections 2010*, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/special/misc/iraqielections2010>
 16 K. KATZMAN, *Iraq: politics, governance and human rights...*, cit., p. 31.

since 2005 and spurred them to overcome their divisions. The new alliance forged by State of Law and INA was marred by different viewpoints and competing agendas but it allowed them to claim the right to appoint the new Prime Minister. This move was obviously seen by Allawi and his supporters as an attempt to strip them of the victory obtained at the ballot boxes and as another means of perpetuating the marginalization of the Arab Sunni community. Even the Kurds were not particularly satisfied with the new political scenario: while an alliance with Allawi would have been unrealistic due to their bitter enmity with some of his allies (especially in the disputed areas), they were not eager to give their support to al-Maliki, who openly questioned the federal system enshrined in the Iraqi constitution and who did not hesitate to adopt harsh stances towards the Kurdish leadership in order to muster the support of hard-line Arab circles. The result was a stalemate that lasted till the end of 2010, when the leaders of the main Iraqi parties convened in the northern city of Erbil to resolve the dispute. The Erbil agreement, as it came to be known, provided the formal basis for a new government of national unity: while the position of Prime Minister was assigned to Mr. al-Maliki, the premier had to accept an allocation of institutional and ministerial positions reflecting the participation of the 4 major slates (with the key ministry of Defence to be assigned to politicians/officials close to Iraqiyya). Furthermore, the accord included a series of measures aimed at curtailing the power invested in the office of the Prime Minister and at satisfying a series of longstanding Kurdish demands¹⁷.

3. The failure of the Erbil Agreement and the Iraqi political scenario ahead of the 2014 elections

The compromise reached in Erbil proved to be merely empty promises. Once nominated prime minister, al-Maliki began to reassert his influence over the Iraqi system, exploiting the divisions within Iraqiyya, the fragile leadership of Allawi and the waning influence exerted by Washington. In this framework should be read the campaigns promoted by the Premier against high-level Sunni officials¹⁸ as well as the exploitation of a series of sentences issued by the Supreme Federal Court to limit the powers of

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¹⁷ M. FANTAPPIE, *Iraq: Maliki Stalls for Time*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 10 March 2011, <http://m.ceip.org/beirut/2011/03/10/iraq-maliki-stalls-for-time/a4kx>.

¹⁸ In December 2011, a few days after the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, key Arab Sunni leaders belonging to the Iraqiyya slate were targeted by a series of harsh security measures. Particularly critical was the position of vice president Tariq al-Hashimi who had his house surrounded by security forces and his bodyguards arrested. Al-Hashimi fled to the KRG and later left the country to avoid arrest on murder charges. A year later the finance minister Rafi al-Issawi was targeted by similar measures sparking a protest movement which paralysed for months most of the Arab Sunni majority provinces of the country.

parliament and to curb the autonomy of previously independent institutions (like the Central Bank, the Integrity Commission and the High Electoral Commission)¹⁹.

In 2012 the growing influence the office of Prime Minister was exerting over the state led to increasing internal opposition as well as to a failed attempt to topple al-Maliki through a no-confidence vote²⁰. But it was only in December 2012 that the extent of the opposition to the Premier was revealed, with the explosion of widespread protests in Niniveh, al-Anbar, Diyala, Salah al-Din and Tamim. While sparked by a series of charges made against the Minister of Finance and prominent member of Iraqiyya Rafi al-Issawi, the protests reflected the Arab Sunni community's increasing dissatisfaction with a government perceived as sectarian and inherently hostile. The crisis reached its peak with the Hawija massacre in April 2013, when clashes between protestors and security forces resulted in hundreds of deaths and in the explosion of a new wave of ethno-sectarian violence²¹.

In the midst of this climate of escalating violence and political infighting, the 2013 provincial elections came to be perceived as an important test for the ambitions of the Prime Minister and the opposition as well as a foretaste of the political battle to be waged in occasion of the 2014 national voting.

The results represented – as in 2009 – a significant watershed for the Iraqi political arena. While the defeat of Iraqiyya was largely predictable due to its deep divisions, State of Law's somewhat poor performance was quite unexpected as was the significant fragmentation of the Iraqi political spectrum, with no key political party able to gain full control of any province.

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¹⁹ In July 2010 the Higher Judicial Council ruled that new legislation could be initiated only by the president of Iraq or by the government. The parliament could only modify laws already introduced. See T. DODGE, *State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism*, *International Affairs*, 89:2, 2013, p. 248-249.

²⁰ Middle East Policy Council, *Maliki and the opposition*, *Middle East in Focus*, June 2012, <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/maliki-and-opposition?print>.

²¹ International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, «Middle East Report», no. 144, August 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state.pdf>.

At the Shia level, while al-Maliki's coalition managed to come in first in 7 of the 9 Shia majority provinces, it lost more than 50 seats with respect to the 2009 vote and was unable to obtain an outright majority in any province²². These results, while recognizing State of Law's primacy in the Iraqi political arena, confirmed its inability to win the support of the majority of the Iraqi population, creating a power vacuum which its main opponents proved able to exploit, as demonstrated by the good results reached by the Sadrist and even more by ISCI. Both movements showed prowess in coming to terms with the prime minister when no other political option appeared appropriate (as in Basra, Maysan, Qadisiyya), at the same time not hesitating to shut him out of key positions wherever this was possible/suitable, as happened in Baghdad²³. While the capital saw al-Maliki victorious, the alliance between the Sadrists, ISCI and the Arab Sunni-backed al-Mutahidoun list of Usama al-Nujaifi enabled them to win control of the province. Significant also were the results of "local" candidates/lists not directly associated with any major political party, such as those in Kerbala and Najaf (although in both provinces al-Maliki's support proved fundamental to control of provincial councils).

On the Arab Sunni level, the situation appeared more complicated: while the secular al-Mutahidoun list partially filled the political vacuum left by Iraqiyya on the national level, a series of local groups challenged its predominance in the Arab Sunni political spectrum. Although al-Nujaifi succeeded in securing record results in Baghdad (winning chairmanship of the provincial council) and in replacing Iraqiyya as the major party in al-Anbar, he lost the huge support he had had in Niniveh (obtaining just 8 seats out of the 19 won in 2009 and coming in second after the Kurdish bloc) probably due to his rapprochement with the major Kurdish parties and to the appeal the more extreme political forces had for the local population²⁴. In Diyala the secular list supported by al-Mutahidoun forged a coalition government with the Sadrists and the Kurds, while in Salahaddin the Sunni governor was re-elected thanks to the support of the Nujaifi's bloc.

On the KRG level, the September 2013 parliamentary polls resulted in a significant shift of the traditional equilibriums dominating the Northern provinces. For the first time since 1992 the two major KRG parties (KDP

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²² A. ALI, *Iraqi provincial elections results: final but not decisive*, Institute for the Study of War, Iraq Update, May 2013, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.it/2013/05/iraq-update-19-iraqi-2013-provincial.html>

²³ R. VISSER, *The first batch of new Iraqi provincial governments*, 17 June 2013, <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2013/06/17/first-batch-of-new-iraqi-provincial-govts/>

²⁴ A. ALI, *Provincial elections outcomes: the political fragmentation of Iraqi Sunnis and Shia*, Iraq Update, June 2013, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.it/2013/06/provincial-election-outcomes-political.html>

and PUK) decided not to run together but to take part individually in the race. While, as widely expected, the KDP emerged as the main political force in the north (obtaining more than one third of the preferences), the PUK suffered a bitter defeat (16% of the votes) while Gorran emerged as the second party in the KRG (23-24%). Particularly important were also the results of the region's two main Islamist parties, the Kurdistan Islamic Union and the Kurdistan Islamic Group, which obtained respectively 10% and 6% of the preferences²⁵.

In this framework, growing intra-sectarian rivalry and greater fragmentation of the political spectrum were the two most evident trends emerging in the wake of the provincial vote. These trends are perfectly in line with the “local” nature of these elections. Unlike nationwide elections, where ethno-sectarian allegiances can be more easily activated and exploited, provincial elections tend to reward candidates/parties with solid links to their communities and with political agendas concerned with the most pressing (and pragmatic) needs of their constituencies.

Despite such considerations the 2013 provincial vote provided significant indications even on the national level. Al-Maliki counted on good results at the ballot boxes to boost his democratic credentials and to reassert his control over the Iraqi system through creation of a majoritarian government replacing the current national-unity cabinet. There is thus no doubt that the Prime Minister emerged significantly weakened from the local balloting, as shown by rumours indicating growing dissent within the State of Law coalition concerning his leadership and his bid for re-election in the 2014 electoral round. On the other hand, the recent voting underlined the ISCI's (and, albeit partially, Sadr's) grand return and their readiness to forge an alliance of interests with their Sunni archenemies to counteract the ascendancy of the premier. At the same time, despite such significant developments, the fragmentation of the “opposition front” remains deep and evident and local alliances appear to be built more on an ad hoc basis than on a coherent and long-term strategy. To this already complex scenario should also be added the significant influence the Kurdish parties will exert on the national level. While it will be difficult for them to play the same role of “kingmakers” as they did in the past, their support will be critical to the future equilibriums of the country, as demonstrated both by the rapprochement seen in the past year-and-a-half between key Arab Sunni and Kurdish political players and by the recent reinstatement of cautious dialogue between al-Maliki and Barzani.

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²⁵ For preliminary electoral results see A. MUSHREQ, *PUK Falls to Third Place In Iraqi Kurdistan Elections*, al-Monitor, September 27, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iraq-elections-preliminary-results.html#ixzz2gNMd4Jh1> and RUDAW, *KRG Parliament elections results*, September 24, 2013, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/elections/results>.



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