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## COALITION-BUILDING IN IRAQ: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

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More than four months after it was elected on 15 December 2005, the Iraqi Council of Representatives (Parliament) was finally able to nominate a new prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, along with a State President, Jalal al-Talabani (the incumbent), and a new Speaker, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani. The long delay was ostensibly due to the crisis surrounding Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, the interim Prime Minister, who was initially nominated by the Shi'ite coalition (in February 2006) as its candidate for the post but was unable to put together a governing coalition. However, the crisis surrounding Ja'fari's candidacy was really only the tip of a deep, structural problem afflicting Iraqi polity and society since the formation of the modern state.

Ja'fari was stripped of his nomination as a result of heavy pressure by the United States, a Sunni-Kurdish alliance, and even the Shi'ite coalition that had originally chosen him. The pretext for his ouster was his inability during his term as interim prime minister to suppress the terrorism and violence washing over the country, which culminated in February in the demolition of the Shi'ite mosque in Samara and the subsequent attacks by Shi'ites on Sunni mosques and religious leaders. In fact, his ouster reflected changes both in the domestic political map and in the position of the United States. Ja'fari was

originally nominated following a rift within the Shi'ite coalition between the Da'wa Party (headed by Ja'fari) and the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) headed by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. In February, Ja'fari had prevailed by only one vote when Muqtada al-Sadr's faction decided to support him. Armed with this mandate, Ja'fari refused thereafter to cede the nomination until the very last minute, when pressure by Ayatollah Ali Sistani forced him to submit. Nevertheless, his successor, al-Maliki, also owes his nomination to al-Sadr and is also a member of Da'wa, not SCIRI. These events demonstrate Sistani's decisive political influence but also the convergence of interests between Da'wa and the extremist al-Sadr faction, which may continue to determine events for the entire Shi'ite camp.

Of course, Ja'fari's failure was also due to unrelenting pressure from a Kurdish-Sunni alliance that had opposed him from the outset. The Kurds rejected him because he had infringed on the powers of President Talabani (a Kurd) and because of his uncompromising resistance to Kurdish demands to include Kirkuk in the Kurdish federal region. The Sunnis rejected him because of his "de-Ba'thification" policies and because he made no effort to stop the retaliatory attacks on Sunnis by the Shi'ite Badr militias.

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This temporary convergence of interests dramatizes the brittleness of the Shi'ite-Kurdish alliance that has operated since the American invasion, the Kurdish role as the "swing vote" between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and the fluidity of political loyalties, which can quickly transform today's compromise into tomorrow's deadlock.

Finally, the American role was critical. At the height of the government crisis, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw came to Baghdad to try to break the stalemate by backing the Sunni-Kurdish demand for al-Ja'fari to step down. That reflects a conceptual shift in American policy. For much of the time since 2003, the US virtually ignored the Sunnis and even countenanced efforts to isolate them. But the Americans increasingly came to appreciate that it is impossible to stabilize Iraq without Sunni cooperation and also to suspect that the Shi'ites were growing progressively more intimate with Iran – the most serious rival of the West in the Middle East -- and that it was therefore necessary to support some counterweight. However, the decision to do so by acting to get rid of al-Ja'fari highlights the dilemma raised when the promotion of democracy leads to policies that adversely affect other interests. Ja'fari's supporters, protesting his ouster, gave symbolic expression to their denunciation of western choices by demonstrating with coffins marked "Death of Democracy."

If the institution of democratic rule in Iraq is problematic in the current circumstances, the even less ambitious goal of a stable, functioning state may also be out of reach. Ending the present stalemate and forming a regular government could presumably indicate that such a goal is attainable. But though a new government may eventually be formed, many other challenges will remain. Maliki, after all, is little more than a compromise candidate put forward in place of his more divisive predecessor. He spent most of his days in exile

in Syria, which may have influenced his political outlook, and he never developed ties with the United States. In contrast to other Shi'ite exiles and activists, he has had little exposure to the West and his reputation on social issues, such as improving the status of women, is also illiberal.

To make matters worse, American support for his nomination may well taint him as a collaborator in the eyes of the Sunnis and of some Shi'ites, as well. And even if that does not happen, Maliki's efforts to unify the ranks and stabilize the political map might run into many other obstacles. The most complicated issue on the agenda is the Sunni demand to review the debate on the constitution, in keeping with the promise made to them on the eve of the October 2005 referendum as an incentive for them to vote. Needless to say, reviving that debate would reopen the fundamental questions of political order, including the question of federalism in Iraq, the nature of relations between different groups and sects, the distribution of power and resources, and the state's very identity and orientation.

Overshadowing this entire debate is the fabric of social relations, which was essentially shredded after the elimination of the previous regime. Even if the current situation is not a full-blown civil war, recent grisly events (such as the discovery in April of 2000 corpses in Baghdad), certainly indicate growing religious and ethnic polarization, declining confidence in a weak central government, and a loss of any sense of direction. Bent on preventing any stability that might entrench the changes since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, especially those that have made the Sunnis into a second-rank force, the terrorists and other opposition forces are now not only preserving "the republic of fear." They are also turning Iraq into a failed state.

**KEYWORD:** Iraq