

Upcoming elections in Iraq: Prospects and Challenges

Rajeev Agarwal and Divya Malhotra

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Amidst political instability, violence, economic disequilibrium and social chaos, Iraq is gearing up for the general elections on April 30, 2014. This will be the first parliamentary election after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the third since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Iraq's revival in the coming decades is the most critical issue which could well be dictated by the outcome of these elections. Nouri al-Maliki, the Shiite PM, seeking a third term in office, is facing growing opposition at home, including from his powerful Shia allies. There is also a growing rift within Maliki's party members that his third consecutive political victory could marginalize them and strengthen his monopoly in the party as well as national politics. As Iraq gears up for the upcoming elections, there are some fundamental questions which need to be examined:

- What are the major challenges facing Iraq as it goes for parliamentary elections?
- What are the prospects of current regime retaining political power?

Background

The US-led invasion of 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein's despotic rule over Iraq. In a key speech in 2003, President Bush had avowed that "democracy will succeed" in Iraq and envisioned "post-Saddam Iraq as a flourishing democracy." In the last decade however, Iraq has, at best, has seen a violent and low-intensity democracy.

The first post-Saddam elections were held on Jan 30, 2005 forming 275-seat transitional National Assembly mandated to write a new Constitution. These elections were, however, boycotted by Sunnis, which undermined the legitimacy of the elections and fueled violence. After months of constitutional maneuvering, the new constitution was approved by a referendum on October 15, 2005. Soon after, a second election was held on December 15, 2005 to elect a permanent Iraqi Council of Representatives. 79.6% voter turnout and relatively low levels of violence during polling were encouraging signs for the political transition. United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a bloc consisting of 18 conservative Shia Islamist groups won the elections, and after months of negotiations between Iraqi politicians, leaders of UIA and the US, Nouri al-Maliki representing Islamic Dawa Party was sworn in as Prime minister on May 20, 2006.

The next elections in 2010 suffered on two grounds; internal schism within the UIA and ban on almost 500 candidates, mostly Sunni Muslims, including several prominent Sunni politicians due to alleged links with the Ba'ath Party. Despite this, the Sunni-dominated secular group *Iraqi list coalition* led by Iyad Allawi; a secular Shiite leader won two seats more than al-Maliki's *state of law bloc*, but could not form the government leading to an impasse. Iran's efforts and influence broke the impasse and led to formation of the al-Ittilaf al-Watani al-Iraqi (Iraqi National Alliance) in May 2010 with Maliki the prime minister.

Al-Maliki, who returned to Iraq in 2003 after serving 23 years of exile in Tehran and Damascus, faces major challenges as he seeks his third term. Maliki has often been accused of shia-

zation of Iraqi politics, However, some steps taken by him run counter to this discourse, like the *Operation Charge of the Knights*; an offensive against the Sadr militias in Basra in March 2008 which won Maliki the confidence of many Sunnis and Kurds. Also in 2009, a mixed marriage policy programme was launched to encourage Shia-Sunni marriages under which \$1800 was offered to the newly-wed couples. Despite this, Maliki's style of governance has remained questionable within Iraq. When in 2011, Iraqiyya bloc's Saleh al-Mutlaq; one of the three deputy prime ministers of Iraq since 2010 publicly denounced al-Maliki's autocratic style, the former was asked to submit his resignation.

Challenges

The political climate in Iraq has been tense given the fault lines within the rival Shia and Sunni blocs. UIA split into two Shia blocs in 2009; the State of Law Coalition, headed by Nouri al-Maliki, and the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) led by Ammar Hakim. In the elections of 2010, the parties contested as opposing coalitions, formally marking the political split. In addition, a powerful Shiite cleric and a vocal critic of US presence in Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr suddenly announced his retirement from politics on February 14 this year, which too could add to the discontent in Shia bloc. As regards the Sunnis, during the 2010 elections, they formed one major bloc – the Iraqi Coalition List under leadership of secular Shia Ayad Allawi. In the elections slated for April this year, however, Allawi's Iraqiya Bloc will be competing with two more Sunni blocs; the United Bloc headed by Osama al-Nujaifi, the current speaker of the House and the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue headed by current Deputy PM Saleh al-Mutlaq.

Sectarian violence is also a major issue facing Iraq. The bombing of *Al Askari* Shia mosque in Sammara on February 22, 2006 marked the beginning of Maliki's term as PM, and since then, Iraq has experienced escalating violence. Since January 2005 till February 2014, 110,637 civilians lost their lives, as per Iraq Body Count estimates. In January this year alone, a total of 733 Iraqis were killed according to UNAMI figures. Amidst such tense situation, voter turnout remains a valid concern.

Another concern is the ban on participation of Sunnis. Post-Saddam period has witnessed repeated electoral bans on Sunnis including the ban on 500 odd prominent Sunni leaders in 2010. Although there are no official reports of electoral ban on Sunnis this time, an *All Iraq News report* recently revealed that travel bans and arrest warrants are being issued against members of Iraqi parliament; mostly Sunnis, members of Iraqiya bloc and critics of al-Maliki.

Iraqi voters based abroad would be another vital factor during these elections. On December 31, Chief Electoral Officer of Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), Mukdad al Sharify confirmed that the IHEC offices outside Iraq will run the registration and voting process for Iraqis living abroad to coincide with the parliamentary elections. It will be interesting to see how this segment of Iraqi populace contributes to the political future of Iraq.

Legitimacy of the elections is going to remain questionable. In January 2013, a draft law restricting the term of the prime minister, president and parliamentary speaker to a maximum of two terms was passed, however, the Federal Supreme Court, overturned the law within few days, legitimizing Maliki's prolonged stay in Iraqi politics.

Regional and external players are indispensable elements in Iraq's political canvas. In the decade following 2003, the US and Iran had tremendous influence over Baghdad's political strategy. The rise of Al-Maliki is a clear symbol of Iran's influence in Iraq. Role of the US post 2011 withdrawal has diminished giving Iran greater leverage. The role of Russia in courting Iraq with defence and oil deals is significant. The fact that Iran and Russian interests converge in Iraq reinforces Moscow's influence in Baghdad. The Syrian crisis and the transnational Kurdish issue has been a restricting factor in Iraq's regional engagement. Turkey's attempts to deal directly with

the Kurdish Autonomous Region on oil have often led to internal discord in Iraq which could have bearing on the coming elections.

Prospects

Iraq is still politically weak and socially fragile, clearly divided into Sunnis, Shias and Kurds camps. Despite efforts to rebuild its weak economy by kick-starting the oil industry, Iraq's economy continues to remain vulnerable. The onus of rebuilding Iraq; economically, politically and socially will essentially fall upon the elected government. It will be important to see whether any sectarian bloc emerges victor or the political power is distributed in a coalition similar to the 2010 elections.

Iraq stands at crucial cross roads. The next five years could well lay the framework for future consolidation of Iraq. While the issues of violence, sectarian divide and external influence will continue, it is the elected government and its policies which will dictate whether or not Iraq can emerge as a significant country in the next decades. Despite the current challenges in Iraq and Maliki's growing unpopularity due to his autocratic style, chances of his political bloc retaining power remain significant, owing to the consistent support from Iran as well as a fragmented Sunni opposition.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.