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Iranian elephant in the Iraqi room

By Sreeram Chaulia

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The kerfuffle triggered in Iraq by a government panel's recent disqualification of over 500 candidates from the parliamentary elections in March has engendered a new crisis that threatens to unravel delicate national reconciliation and stabilization goals.

Despite the immediate intervention of United States Vice President Joseph Biden with a peacemaking solution that would allow all the candidates under the scanner to contest the elections and narrow the investigation to victorious ones after the results, the bad blood from the 2005 elections lends a foul air to the whole fracas.

The controversial decision by the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) has sent shivers down the spines of Iraq's Sunni minority community, which fears that its leaders have been deliberately blacklisted to deepen a majoritarian Shi'ite-dominated polity. Among the prominent Sunni [politicians](#) who will be barred by the commission's ruling are Saleh al-Mutlaq, a leading light of the secular Iraqiya bloc that is the main competitor to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shi'ite State of Law coalition.

The AJC was created by act of parliament in January 2008 to prevent former members of dethroned dictator Saddam Hussein's predominantly Sunni Ba'ath Party from holding positions of [power and influence](#) in [the new order](#). It took over the baton from a Higher [National](#) De-Ba'athification Commission (HNDBC), which was initially tasked by the Iraqi Governing Council in 2003 to weed out sympathizers and active agents who had propped up Saddam's regime of terror.

The AJC was supposed to be a reformed institution compared with its predecessor by virtue of its orders being subject to an appeals process, wherein any individual removed from public office or

banned from contesting for it could approach an external independent body of judges for reinstatement.

The HNDBC had become notorious for carrying out witch-hunts against suspected Ba'ath Party members as well as those who had bare minimal connections with Saddam's system. Led by the hawkish former Shi'ite exiled politician and ex-American ally in Iraq, Ahmad Chalabi, the HNDBC had exacerbated sectarian divides and state collapse by allegedly harassing Sunnis of all walks of life who had practically no truck with Saddam's dictatorship.

Chalabi's dubious distinction as a pathfinder for the US invasion of Iraq via the pretext of Saddam's [weapons of mass destruction](#), and his subsequent overzealous purging from the Iraqi [public services](#) of Ba'athists who could have been useful to prevent the breakdown into anarchy, led the American occupation forces to gradually distance themselves from this divisive figure.

However, despite all the upheavals and twists in Iraq's political formations and alliances over the years since 2003, Chalabi survived and held onto the de-Ba'athification positions in government. He and members of his Iraqi National Congress (INC) held the reins of the HNDBC and managed to place their top [guns](#) even in the rationalized AJC, which was meant to be less vindictive and more true to its created purpose of ushering in transitional justice in Iraq.

The latest disqualification drama has focused light on the mysterious figure of Ali Faisal al-Lami, Chalabi's deputy on the AJC and a friend-turned-foe of the Americans in Iraq. The recriminations that flew back and forth after Iraq's election commission released the list of 511 candidates for alleged links to the Ba'ath Party have centered on Lami's perceived extremist Shi'ite ties and biased background.

Once an honored guest at the George W Bush White House in Washington, along with his boss, Chalabi, Lami [was arrested](#) by American forces in August 2008 on grounds that he was involved with Shi'ite terrorist groups and Iran's intelligence apparatus. Held and tortured for close to one [year](#) in different jails, including what he claims was a secret US-run prison facility, Lami was so high-profile a captive that he recounts being directly advised to "cooperate" by General David Petraeus, the top commander of American forces in Iraq at that time.

Lami makes no secret of his role as a "liaison" between the followers of radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (now inactive) and Chalabi's INC. He also admits to having forged a "close friendship" with the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous) militia, which is a splinter faction of the Mahdi Army and a militant movement that continues Muqtada's resistance agenda of driving Western occupiers out of Iraq.

Asa'ib garnered global headlines last month when it released kidnapped British journalist Peter Moore, two-and-half years after he was abducted. Petraeus is on record as saying that he is "absolutely certain" that Moore was held by Asa'ib in Iran. Though this is denied by Washington, London and the Iraqi authorities, the price of Moore's life was probably the freeing of Qais al-Khazali by the Maliki government this month. This young Shi'ite clone of Muqtada has been projected in the media as a favorite of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and hardline clerical establishment and as an anti-Western resistance hero with a great political future in Iraq.

What is most intriguing is that the same Lami who had a leading hand in the disqualifications of leading Sunni politicians testified to having met Qais at Camp Cropper, the high-value detention center of the Americans in Baghdad. Qais and Lami "hugged and exchanged traditional kisses on each cheek" and confided to each other that both men were in the same boat of "resistance against the occupation".

All the circumstantial evidence thus points to Iranian blessings for the AJC's bombshell on Iraq's Sunni politicians, further complicating the US's goal of phased withdrawal following the March elections. If Iraq's sectarian divide settles down into an ominous and lengthy shadow over the post-election state's make-up, the Barack Obama administration's [timetable](#) of winding up combat operations and exiting the scene by August 2010 might leave behind a status quo that strategically [benefits](#) Iran the most.

Defenders of the AJC's de-Ba'athification move against key Sunni politicians contend that it was a non-sectarian measure that affects both Sunni and Shiite candidates. According to Reuters, more Shi'ites than Sunnis have been axed in the AJC's list for being associated with the Ba'ath Party. Analysts have also pointed to the fact that the worst sufferers of the AJC's ban are not Sunnis but secular parties and coalitions, such as Iraqiya and current Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani's Iraq Unity coalition.

These nuances overlook the plain fact that in a Shi'ite-majority country like Iraq, "secular parties" are the only meaningful vehicles for Sunni tribal leaders and bigwigs to register their influence at the national level. If the AJC's politicized and seemingly Iran-prodded ruling ends up, as expected, benefiting the electoral chances of Maliki's State of Law coalition and the other major Shi'ite conglomerate, the Iraqi National Alliance led by the Tehran-backed Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the sense that Sunnis have again been short-changed after they boycotted the 2005 elections will solidify.

It is no coincidence that, besides Lami and Chalabi, two of the AJC's major panelists are candidates in the elections representing the ISCI's alliance. For all the efforts at streamlining transitional justice in Iraq into a nation-building rather than a nation-splitting exercise, the stable of the AJC was packed with Iran-preferred horses. One of the affected secular politicians correctly termed the AJC's partisan list "a general massacre of democracy". He could have added that it was Iran's gift.