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Iraq squeezed between US and Iran

By Pepe Escobar

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More than seven years after the United States invasion vowed to bring "democracy" to Iraq, the neo-conservative who inspired the project may at least relish the guilty pleasure of watching sectarianism win this month's elections - and seeing former prime minister and Central Intelligence Agency asset Iyad Allawi and current Iran-aligned Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki losing out.

Technically, Allawi's Iraqi List (Iraqiya) coalition won 91 delegates to the next National Assembly, compared with the 89 of Maliki's State of Law list. The Sadrists got 38 seats among the 70 garnered by the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) bloc. The Kurdistan Alliance got 43 seats. Smaller parties won 33 seats. The great loser was the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), part of INA. Sectarianism prevails.

One thing is already virtually certain: Allawi will battle to become the next prime minister. So, in all probability, will Maliki himself. Let's see why.

Allawi's coalition is a motley crew of former Ba'athists (such as Allawi), secular Sunnis and Shi'ites, nationalists, anyone who is against Iranian interference, plus a collection of provincial parties. Allawi was heavily supported by all Sunni states in the Gulf - especially Saudi Arabia. He secured a surprising number of votes from Sunnis in northern and western Iraq. In Baghdad, he received not only the remaining Sunni votes (the city is now overwhelmingly Shi'ite) but also a lot of secular Shi'ite votes.

In Maliki's State of Law coalition, the predominant power is his Islamic Da'wa party. Before the election, Maliki got into bed with INA and organized what for all practical purposes was a purge

of the vast security and intelligence apparatus (which are de facto financed by US taxpayers).

The INA itself was put together in Tehran in the summer of 2009 as the late Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of ISCI, lay dying. His son, Ammar al-Hakim, is now the head of ISCI. The key truce between Muqtada al-Sadr and al-Hakim was organized by none other than the speaker of the majlis (Iranian parliament), Ali Larijani, who is an Iraqi born in Najaf, as well as the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

Now Tehran is pulling no punches. Late last week, a meeting in Tehran united Maliki's people, Sadrists, President Jalal Talabani (a Kurd), and Vice President Adil Abdel Mahdi of ISCI. Target: find the way to set up a non-Allawi-led coalition. In fact, the only feasible way out for Iraq is a government of national unity that would include Maliki's people, Allawi's people and the Sadrists. Easier said than done - as the Sadrists still despise Maliki; he unleashed the Iraqi army against the Mahdi Army in Basra and Baghdad in the summer of 2008.

Militias on the lookout

For all the talk of "democracy", Iraq remains militia heaven. Everybody has a militia - from the Kurds to the Sadrists' Mahdi Army, not to mention the notorious Badr Brigade of the ISCI. The former Sunni Iraqi resistance - from Ansar al-Islam to the 1920 Revolution Brigades - appears to have disarmed, but in fact it is laying low. The Sahwa ("Awakening") movement - which US corporate media spun as "heroes" in the fight against al-Qaeda - is a mess. Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, part of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), as well as assorted fringe jihadi groups may be sleeping, but not for long.

Any chance of Allawi getting into power would involve an extremely improbable deal with the Kurds - who are vociferous enemies of Allawi's Arab nationalist allies, especially in disputed Mosul. Allawi would also need the support of all smaller parties. Allawi cannot attract the Sadrists; first of all because they are fierce anti-Ba'athists, and second because they have entered a de facto alliance with Iran since 2007. Muqtada has been living and studying in Qom. The Sadrists' key appeal to Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqis alike is the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops.

Seven years ago, the annihilation of Saddam's already crippled military machine may have terminated one of those perennial "existential threats" to Israel. As for looting Iraq's fabulous oil reserves, that will be a more complex proposition as Chinese and Russian oil majors are now back in the game (see [Iraq oil auction hits the jackpot](#) Asia Times Online, December 16, 2009). Withdrawal or no withdrawal, Washington must remain in Iraq in some muscular way to try to profit from the energy bonanza. Thus the necessity of a huge mega-protected fortress (budget for 2010: US\$675 million) disguised as the American Embassy, crammed with more than 10,000 intelligence operatives.

So the stage is set for major fireworks to erupt. Washington's game is to do everything to back Allawi. Tehran's game is to support Maliki, the Sadrists and ISCI inside the INA, and the Kurds against Allawi. In one more piercing irony permeating the whole Iraqi tragedy, if "Saddam lite"

Allawi ends up getting nothing, one can bet a basket of explosives that the Sunnis will go literally ballistic.

Sectarianism, not "democracy", rules.