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Ahmadinejad Congratulates his Candidate, al-Maliki

Sunni Arabs Return to Parliament but Shiite-Kurdish Ascendancy Holds

Juan Cole

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Although I agree that Iran got what it wanted, I'm not completely sure this is such a negative outcome as many people think.

I was also a little surprised that Talabani was named President again. Talabani is a consummate survivor and is really not ideologically close to Iran. He has managed to keep himself in the sweet spot between very dangerous powers for his entire career, switching sides repeatedly in the Iran-Iraq war and trying his utmost to stay alive. He is doing the same now, between Iran and the US. I am a little surprised that he still has such stature on a national level, because his party the PUK was weakened considerably by the new Goran party under Nawchirvan Mustafa. The Kurds want commerce with Iran and to maintain the status quo, but not excessive Iranian influence. They are sympathetic to Iranian culture if not the current Iranian leadership – most Iraqi Kurds were highly sympathetic to the Green movement in Iran and the Iranian Kurds voted overwhelmingly against Ahmedinejad in the failed elections. Iran is not all that much strengthened with

respect to Kurdish politics or the Kurdish block – they don't want a fight with Iran, but they don't trust or particularly like Ahmedinejad either. And they will probably continue to turn a blind eye to the 40,000 plus Iranian Kurds living and working in Iraq, nearly all of whom are politically affiliated with various Kurdish nationalist parties that can't stand Ahmedinejad.

In terms of Maliki's ability to hold on to power, I think this is also a mixed result in terms of US-Iranian competition. Maliki's base of support in Karbala is probably the least hostile toward the west of any Shia' political block, and Maliki cannot be that popular among some of the clergy in Qom who have been supporting Sadr all this time. I would have thought that al-Hakim who has considerable Iranian support would have even been better for Iran. But neither of them could possibly have come out of this in a higher leadership position because it's in neither Iran nor the United State's interest to see the war flare back up again. Maliki is probably the most acceptable Shia' leader (other than Allawi) to most Sunnis, because at least Maliki had the courage to take on the Sadr militias in Basra a few years ago. Despite Sadr's nationalistic rhetoric and stated desire to form coalitions against the Americans, many in the Sunni community especially in Baghdad remember the Mahdi Army with horror for their outrages in the 2006 civil war. The one thing upon which the Kurds and the Sunnis can agree is their intense dislike of Sadr and his thugs.

I think what the results really do say is that a plurality of Shia' and a majority of Kurds still see the Ba'ath party and the legacy of Sunni Arab Nationalism as their greatest threat, greater than the US or Iran. That's still true despite the fact that many urban educated Shia' abandoned Shia' religious parties and supported Allawi and the Iraqiyyah list for reasons of ideology rather than religion. I certainly don't think that Allawi is an unreconstructed Ba'athist, but he was unacceptable because a majority of Kurds and Shia feel that too much power would go back to the old political class in Iraq, and even though it was an invasion and not a revolution that got Saddam out of power, it's still too soon for the old guard to credibly exercise much political power. Iraq remains fundamentally traumatized by the Ba'ath Party and this will be reflected in politics for some time to come – be it in chronic Kurdish insecurity and insistence on a high degree of autonomy, or the Shia' parties reluctance to allow meaningful power-sharing with Sunni politicians and political movements that they feel are still associated with Saddam's legacy. Give it another 5-10 years if there is peace and an improving economy, and Shia' hostility and Kurdish resistance to any integration may soften a bit.

Iraq ended up getting the least bad solution for most people – which is probably what it needed – a continuation of a government that has not been great, but has not been a disaster either. There urgently needs to be more robust inclusion somehow of Sunni leaders in decisionmaking – but the rhetoric of some politicians, like Nujayfi, still carries with it a toxic legacy that time has not yet softened.