

Iraq's coming election

The region's liveliest system

Nov 5th 2009 | BAGHDAD
 From The Economist print edition

Amid the bickering and chicanery, people are engaging in democracy

SOMETIMES it seems as if Iraqi politicians cannot agree on anything. Parliament has taken months debating a bill to pave the way to elections on January 16th, though at least 296 parties have declared their intention to compete at the polls. Yet outside the chamber many members say they want the same things. The era of sectarian division, they all insist, is over. Shias and Sunnis embrace at press conferences as they present electoral alliances. In the name of reconciliation, politicians disavow the militias that once killed on their behalf. Banners proclaim the goal of "national unity". Is there any sign that such fine dreams might ever come true?

For all the backbiting, progress is plain. After months of negotiations, six main electoral blocks have emerged to meet a looming deadline for registering alliances. The three that look most genuinely post-sectarian may well be the strongest. The rest sport fig-leaves of diversity but are tainted with past sectarian violence.

The most obviously sectarian leftover is the biggest Kurdish block. One of its two main components, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Iraq's national president, Jalal Talabani, has split and may even disappear. Even if the Kurds' enviable discipline in parliament holds up, their role as kingmakers may be over. After a rule change, the chamber can now approve the next president with half the votes rather than two-thirds as before, thus weakening the Kurds' bargaining power.

The biggest Sunni block in the outgoing parliament, the Iraqi Accord Front, better known by its Arabic name, Tawafuq, is doing even worse. At provincial elections earlier this year its voters fled in droves. By comparison, the last remaining Shia block, the Iraqi National Alliance, is likely to do quite well at the polls for the simple reason that more than 60% of the voters are Shias. Yet, it has no obvious candidate for prime minister and its members have an array of ideologies. Being a Shia is their only glue. When two of the alliance's parties, the Sadrists (followers of a cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr) and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, recently held their own informal primaries, a first for Iraq, the event was widely seen as a sign of weakness, with bigwigs trying to rally unenthusiastic troops.

On the other hand, the leaders of three non-sectarian alliances are making more of a buzz on the street. The prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia, hopes to build on the success of his State-of-Law block that did well in the provincial elections. He has fewer Sunni partners than he had hoped. But the incumbent's powers of patronage should give him a good start.

His main rivals are two brand-new alliances. One is led by Iyad Allawi, a keenly secular Shia and former Baathist who was a prime minister after the fall of Saddam Hussein. He has teamed up with Saleh al-Mutlaq, a stalwart Sunni member of parliament, to form the Iraqi National Movement. Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni who is the

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Too many sects damage your health

country's joint vice-president, may join them, though he was previously a leading figure in the Accord Front.

The National Movement's main rival is a group called Unity led by Jawad al-Bolani, the interior minister, a secular Shia, along with Ahmed abu Risha, who leads a Sunni movement called the Awakening that helped pacify the province of Anbar, to the west of Baghdad, which was a hotbed of insurgents. Both alliances have strong links with the military and security services. Unity's leaders are close to the police, whereas the National Movement is notably hostile to Iran, which many Iraqis blame for sponsoring insurgents.

Leaders of these three alliances have managed to cross ethno-sectarian lines as never before in Iraq. "It's a decisive move away from sectarianism," says Reidar Visser, a Norwegian scholar who writes a noted blog on Iraqi politics. Iraqis may be sick of the militias loyal to religious parties that terrorised them for years.

Yet there are limits to the new-found tolerance. All the main non-sectarian alliances are headed by Shias, for Sunnis and Kurds have no chance of electing a prime minister. They will hope to win a few more spoils than before. A non-Shia is likely again to get the fairly toothless presidency.

Moreover, whereas sectarian divisions between Arab Iraqis may have begun to heal, they are deepening between Arabs and Kurds. Tension is rising along the "trigger line" in north-east Iraq that runs between the Kurdish-controlled areas and the rest of the country.

Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington points out in his latest report that Baghdad's political class is conducting an extraordinary experiment. Despite a fierce insurgency, the parliamentary system is now the region's liveliest and most competitive. "Can it go sour at any point?" he asks. "Yes," he glumly answers.

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