

Iraq: bright future or back to chaos?

Ben Smith

Iraq has stabilised and a potential future as an oil-rich democracy beckons. But much remains in the balance

The reputations of the US and the UK are at stake in Iraq and a stable and democratic future for the country is widely accepted to be in the balance over the next few months. US combat troops are due to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011, with a major drawdown as soon as August 2010. Elections to the Iraqi Council of Representatives (parliament) were held in March 2010, and whatever government is eventually formed from it will have to lead the country into the new era of self-reliance.

IRAQ MATTERS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

With hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees still in neighbouring countries, conflict over resources such as water a real possibility and the strength of radical Islam a big concern, western governments say that the region needs a wealthy, pluralistic and stable Iraq. Iran's relationship with the Shi'a majority in Iraq is crucial to its ambitions to be the dominant regional power in the Persian Gulf, now that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has removed the major counter-balance to Iranian influence in the area.

RELATIVELY PEACEFUL AND CLEAN ELECTIONS

The parliamentary election of 7 March 2010 was a crucial test. Levels of violence in the run-up to the election were encouragingly low; that still meant the deaths of 38 Iraqis on election day but not the major upsurge in sectarian violence that many had feared. This was particularly encouraging because Iraqi forces were in charge of security.

A turnout of 62% was acceptable and, crucially, Sunni voters decided not to repeat their boycott of the 2005 general election, despite many provocative disqualifications by Iraq's Justice and Accountability Commission of leading Sunni figures for their alleged involvement in Saddam's Ba'ath Party. International observers concluded that the level of fraud was low.

Also positive was what looks like a growth of voting on policies rather than along sectarian lines. The success of Iyad Allawi's Iraqiya bloc, the least sectarian-based bloc (91 seats in the 325-member Council of Representatives), was testament to that. The incumbent Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law bloc, also a

pragmatic group by Iraqi standards, came a very close second, with 89 seats in the provisional results. Groups closer to Iran did less well.

HORSE TRADING

The problem with the election has been the closeness of the result, and forming a government presents formidable difficulties. Experts say that it will take months, even most of 2010, to reach a conclusion, not least because Iraq's violent recent past means that there are many good reasons for most of the leaders to hate each other. Maliki has ordered a recount in Baghdad, which may reverse the position of the two leading blocs. The role of the radical Shi'a Sadrists and of the Kurds may be crucial, though the US is said to be pressing for a grand coalition between the Allawi and Maliki blocs.

In May 2010 it was announced that Maliki's bloc and the other main Shi'a bloc, the Iraq National Alliance, which won 70 seats and includes the Sadrists, were negotiating over a possible governing pact. Such a coalition would still be short of the 163 seats necessary for a majority and Maliki would probably have to stand down. Maliki is not supported by the Sadrists, having ordered a fierce crackdown on the Sadrists' Mahdi Army militia in 2008.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

- Will prolonged negotiations discredit democracy and foster sectarian violence? How hard can the US or the UK push for the formation of a government without that government appearing illegitimate? Even US influence is dwindling fast; the UK has little if any leverage.

PRAGMATIC GROUPS PERFORMED WELL IN THE ELECTION: BUT A GOVERNING COALITION MUST STILL BE FORMED

Provisional results

	Seats
al-Iraqiya	91
State of Law	89
Iraqi National Alliance	70
Kurdistan Alliance	43
Others	32

Independent High Electoral Commission

- Will Iyad Allawi, seen by the Sunnis as their champion although he himself is a Shi'a Muslim, be excluded from office; would the Sunnis violently reject such an outcome? With a government made up only of Shi'a blocs, Iraq might drift towards Iran and towards becoming an Islamic state.
- Will the withdrawal of American forces let Iraq slip back into violence, or will national security forces hold the line?
- Will the new government be able to reconcile potentially explosive differences over the country's vast oil reserves, leading the country to a wealthy future?
- If Iraq, which is not a member of OPEC, fulfils its oil production potential, it could have a major impact on oil prices.
- After years of delay, will Iraq implement its hydrocarbons legislation and will that result in a bonanza of contracts for western companies?

The rewards of success in Iraq could be enormous for Iraq, its neighbours and the West; the risks remain formidable.

