

CIG Assessment, 9 March 2009

## IRAQ: AFTER THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

*This paper was discussed by a Current Intelligence Group and approved on 9 March 2009.*

### Key Judgements

- I. Maliki views his coalition's success in the provincial elections as a personal victory. It has increased his standing, but his power to achieve specific objectives will still vary with the issue.
- II. A successful challenge to Maliki's position is now unlikely before national elections, expected in early 2010. He will use his success to push for greater centralisation of government. But we would expect any attempt to alter the existing division of power between Baghdad and the Kurdish region to be blocked by the Kurds.
- III. Maliki will try in national elections to repeat his coalition's success in the provincial elections, capitalising on his personal reputation and popular policies. But an improved quality of life for most Iraqis will be difficult to achieve within increasing budgetary constraints: [...]
- IV. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's (ISCI) electoral failure reflected popular unhappiness with its corruption and poor performance in local government to date, its closeness to Iran and the Kurds, its support for regional devolution and its reliance on religious messages. ISCI will be unable to recover sufficiently to maintain its 30 seats in parliament at the next national elections.
- V. The election process indicates the improving capability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the increasing readiness of Iraqis to pursue their objectives through politics instead of violence. Iraqis appear to believe that the election was broadly free and fair.
- VI. Elections have had little impact on Iraq's relationship with its neighbours. Most probably now assume that Maliki will be Prime Minister for another term. [...]

Assessment Base: [...]
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## IRAQ: AFTER THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

*At the request of FCO this paper looks at the implications of Iraq's provincial elections.*

### Progress and change

1. Elections were held in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces on 31 January, with an average 51% turnout. The formerly dominant parties all performed poorly: most incumbents will be replaced. Overall, Prime Minister Maliki's "Rule of Law" (RoL) coalition and secular Sunni parties were the winners at the expense of the Kurds and Islamist parties (see table and Annex). Sadrists won a handful of seats on all southern councils and in Baghdad, despite their poor leadership, disorganised campaign and unpopular association with militias. The most significant changes will be in Ninewa, where the Sunni Hadba coalition has overturned Kurdish control, and the south and Baghdad, where RoL dominated. However, the successful parties obtained absolute majorities only in Basra (RoL) and Ninewa (Hadba): most of the new councils will be coalitions.

Party	Seats
Rule of Law	126
ISCI	55
Sadrists	41
Allawi's coalition	26
Ja'fari's coalition	23
Hadba	19
Total seats	440

2. In contrast to the last elections in 2005, no ethnic or sectarian groups boycotted the poll and Iraqis appear to believe that the election was broadly free and fair, despite numerous allegations of vote-rigging and malpractice. We expect the large Sunni turnout to improve their representation in mixed provinces, undermining Sunni extremism. The Sadrists' participation will increase their stake in mainstream politics and could allay their militancy. Iraqis are likely to expect more from representative provincial councils, which may increase their disappointment if reconstruction and service delivery remain slow, as is likely. We judge that the security of the elections (11 reported attacks compared to some 300 in 2005) indicates both the improving capability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the increasing readiness of Iraqis to pursue their objectives through politics instead of violence.

### ISCI fails to adapt to the new Iraqi politics

3. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) – RoL's main Shia rival – failed to win a single province in the elections despite its extensive use of the media and substantial hand-outs to voters. We judge that ISCI's failure reflected popular unhappiness with its corruption and poor performance in local government to date, its closeness to Iran and the Kurds and its support for regional devolution. Its reliance on religious messages may also have done it some harm, but there is little to substantiate claims of a general Iraqi shift towards secular parties: Maliki's coalition is not secular.

4. [...] Its leadership has come under particular criticism. Reporting shows some ISCI leaders are inclined to shun alliances in favour of moving into opposition [...] In this climate, ISCI may face a leadership crisis when the seriously ill Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim dies and his son Ammar takes over. We judge that ISCI will be unable to recover sufficiently to maintain its 30 seats in parliament at the next national elections, expected in early 2010.

## Implications for Maliki's government

5. [...] Maliki was surprised by the extent of his coalition's success, which he views as a personal victory. [...] media reports that RoL is negotiating with the Sadrists for an overarching agreement to work together in the provinces, sharing power where necessary. Any deal will depend on Maliki meeting Sadrist demands for release of their detainees. [...] We assess that the elections have increased Maliki's standing by demonstrating public confidence in his leadership, but his power to achieve specific objectives will still vary with the issue: for example on hydrocarbons legislation, the selection of the new Parliamentary Speaker and disputed internal boundaries.

6. Maliki's advisers reportedly believe that his popularity will deter challenges from political rivals. [...] We judge that no other party will do so: ISCI appears unwilling to push for a vote of no confidence since its poor electoral showing. Overall, we judge that a successful challenge to Maliki's position is now unlikely before national elections.

## Centralisation or devolution of power?

7. The election results represent an endorsement of strong central government and a set-back for federalism. We judge that Maliki will use his success to push for greater centralisation. He has publicly announced that he wants to change the constitution to return greater power to the national government and prevent the partition of Iraq. ISCI's failure has dealt a blow to the prospect of forming new administrative regions with greater powers than the existing provinces: including any initiative towards a composite southern Shia region. The recent failure of a bid to create a Basra region may deter similar projects – although there are indications that the attempt may be repeated. (However, the Basra bid also shows that the new provincial councils may still see attractions in acquiring region status as a method of consolidating their power.)

8. We would expect any attempt to alter the existing division of power between Baghdad and the Kurdish region to be blocked by the Kurds, either through the Presidency or their control of three provinces.<sup>1</sup> We previously judged that serious disagreements over the devolution of power from the centre to federal regions would probably result in political impasse. [...]

## Implications for governance in the provinces

9. We expect the new provincial councils to work more closely with Maliki. Central government will probably exercise greater influence over the provinces, despite a new Provincial Powers Law that nominally devolves more authority to Governors. The new councils will be more representative, but a lack of capacity and deeply embedded corruption mean that they are unlikely to be significantly better than their predecessors in improving services and law and order.

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<sup>1</sup> Changes to the constitution must be agreed by two-thirds of the voters in each province in a popular referendum. If more than a third of voters reject a proposal in three provinces then it is vetoed.

## Implications for national elections

10. We expect national elections to be similarly peaceful. Maliki will try to repeat his coalition's success in the provincial elections, capitalising on his personal reputation and popular policies to boost security, uphold public sector wages and deliver improved services. But we judge that improvements to quality of life for most Iraqis will be difficult to achieve within increasing budgetary constraints resulting from the low oil price. [...]

11. Maliki's continued electoral success will also depend upon his ability to assemble a credible coalition while preventing his rivals from doing so. [...] Both the Sadrists and Fadilah see benefit in joining a Shia alliance with Maliki; if they did, we judge ISCI would find it difficult to stand separately. Internal rivalries may prevent the Kurdish Alliance from forming an effective opposition to Maliki, despite its probable strong performance in national elections. Increasing Arab-Kurd tensions would make an inter-ethnic political alliance between the Kurds and ISCI difficult to sustain.

## Iraq's relationship with its neighbours

12. We judge that the elections have had little impact on Iraq's relationship with its neighbours. Several regional governments have publicly applauded the elections as a demonstration of Iraq's return to normality and an endorsement of Maliki, but we have little information on their private reactions. [...] Iraq's [...] neighbours, probably now assume that Maliki will be Prime Minister for another term. We judge that Iran will continue to back Maliki and his efforts to lead a Shia political alliance.

Province	Political Entity	Annex Number of Seats
Baghdad (57)	Rule of Law Coalition	28
	Al-Tawafuq List	7
	Independent Freemen Trend	5
	Iraqi National List	5
	Iraqi National Project Assembly	4
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	3
	National Reform Trend	3
	Sab'ians/ Ali Hussein Zahroon	1
	Christians/ Korkees Isha Sada Dawood	1
Basra (35)	Rule of Law Coalition	20
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	5
	Justice and Unity Gathering	2
	Independent Freemen Trend	2
	Iraqi Islamic Party	2
	Iraqi National List	2
	Fadilah Party	1
	Christians	1
Ninewa (37)	Al-Hadba List	19
	Ninewa Fraternised List	12
	Iraqi Islamic Party	3
	Christians	1
	Shabak	1
	Yezidis	1
Anbar (29)	Sahwa and Independents Alliance	8
	National Project Assembly	6
	Tribes and Cultivated (Tawafuq)	6
	The Solution List (al-Hal)	3
	Iraqi National List	2
	Iraqi National Unity	2
	Alliance of Tribes (Sahawat)	2
Salah al-Din (28)	Al-Tawafuq Front/ Salah al-Din	5
	Iraqi National List	5
	Iraqi Project Front	3
	Iraqi National Project Assembly	3
	Iraq Cultivated and Scholars Community	2
	Iraqi Turkmen Front	2
	Building and Liberation Front	2
	Salah al-Din National List	2
	Fraternity and Peaceful Co-existence List	2
	Rule of Law Coalition	2
Diyala (29)	United Accord and Reform Front/ Diyala	9
	Iraqi National Project Assembly	6
	Kurdish Alliance/ Diyala	6
	Iraqi National List	3
	Rule of Law Coalition	2
	Diyala National Alliance	2
	National Reform Trend	1
Wasit (28)	Rule of Law Coalition	13

Province	Political Entity	Number of Seats
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	6
	Independent Freeman Trend	3
	Iraqi National List	3
	Iraqi Constitutional Party	3
Babil (30)	Rule of Law Coalition	8
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	5
	Independent Freeman Trend	3
	National Reform Trend	3
	Iraq Commission of Independent NGOs	3
	Independent Justice Association	3
	Iraqi National List	3
	Al-Ansar Independent Bloc (disciples)	2
Karbala (27)	Amal al-Rafidain List (Hope of Two Rivers)	9
	Rule of Law Coalition	9
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	4
	Independent Freeman Trend	4
	Yousif Majeed al-Haboobi	1
Najaf (28)	Rule of Law Coalition	7
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	7
	Independent Freeman Trend	6
	Loyalty for Najaf List	4
	National Reform Trend	2
	Al-Najaf Independent Federation	2
Muthanna (26)	Rule of Law Coalition	5
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	5
	Kian al Jimhoor List (Mass Entity)	3
	National Reform Trend	3
	Independent Freeman Trend	2
	Gathering for Muthanna List	2
	Independent National List	2
	Independent Iraq Qualified People Gathering	2
Dhi Qar (31)	Middle Euphrates Gathering	2
	Rule of Law Coalition	13
	Independent Freeman Trend	7
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	5
	National Reform Trend	4
Qadisiyah (28)	Fadilah Party	2
	Rule of Law Coalition	11
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	5
	Iraqi National List	3
	National Reform Trend	3
	Independent Freeman Trend	2
	Islamic Loyalty Party	2
Maysan (27)	Fadilah Party	2
	Rule of Law Coalition	8
	Shahid al-Mihrab (ISCI)	8
	Independent Freeman Trend	7
	National Reform Trend	4