

Faced With Urgent Steps, Iraqi Legislators Fail to Agree

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Sunni insurgents are at the gates, yet main parliamentary factions focus on tactical manoeuvring for top posts.

The Iraqi parliament broke up in disarray on July 1 after members failed to agree on a new speaker.

This was the first time legislators had gathered since being elected in April, and they were supposed to set about picking a new speaker as a first step towards building a new cabinet in the face of the continuing offensive by the the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and allied insurgent groups.

However, in under two hours the meeting was over and nothing had been decided.

“The session is adjourned and will be held on June 8, if agreement is reached,” acting speaker Mahdi al-Hafidh said, after members of the Kurdish and Sunni blocs walked out.

As the session began with 255 out of 325 members of parliament in attendance, Kurdish politician Najiba Najib called on Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who was present in the chamber, to end what she called the “siege” the Kurdistan region was suffering.

Acting speaker Hafidh refused to countenance a debate on the issue, saying the meeting would be wholly given over to choosing a full-time speaker. He then ordered a half-hour break in proceedings to give parliamentary factions time for further discussions, but the recess ended with the departure of the Sunni and Kurdish blocs.

Hafidh began discussing what to do now with members of the United Iraqi Alliance, a mainly Shia bloc led by former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jafari.

Jafari said nothing could now be legally decided given that the walk-out meant there was no quorum.

“This is not a boycott, but the political blocs want more time to choose the new speaker of parliament,” Jafari said, adding that a decision on this post was intertwined with the jobs of president and prime minister.

Post-2003 Iraq has had a power-sharing arrangement at the top in which, in the last two parliamentary elections, the post of speaker has been awarded to a Sunni and the prime minister’s job to a Shia, while the presidency has gone to a Kurd.

Because the April election did not give any political force enough of a lead to form a majority government, the various blocs were driven to forge broader alliances, but these have been unable to agree on candidates for the three top posts.

Relationships between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish factions have soured over the last four years, as Sunni politicians accused Prime Minister Maliki of marginalising and targeting their communities. Ties between central government and the autonomous region of Kurdistan have been strained by the latter’s decision to invite oil companies to invest there without consulting Baghdad.

The political confusion undoubtedly created an opportunity for ISIS to make its move, and it stormed through areas west and north of Baghdad in the second week of June. ISIS took Nineveh province including Mosul and Salahuddin in addition to parts of oil-rich Kirkuk.

Political analyst Hamid Fadhil argues that the pursuit of political power for its own sake, and the squabbling and indecision that has ensued, are the principal reasons for the present security threat as well as for Iraq’s economic problems.

“The main aim of these parties is to secure important posts... This will only entrench the present state of affairs,” he told IWPR. “These disagreements have made Iraq’s democracy an experience that no one would wish to emulate.”

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