

Iraqis Need New Leader



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A fierce political battle is underway to determine who will lead Iraq's new government. The prime minister's post, the most powerful and coveted position in Iraq, is at the heart of intense negotiations between the country's top political alliances.

The prime minister will lead Iraq through one of the most critical periods in Iraq's modern history. The United States military withdrawal will be a major test for Iraq's forces and its government.

In addition to security, the new prime minister will need to build stronger relations with Iraq's allies and address domestic challenges, including corruption, services, economic development and national reconciliation. The future of the country will lie in his hands.

The top contenders have all served as prime minister, but re-electing them would be a mistake. In light of the serious issues that Iraq will face – and the political divisiveness of former leaders – Iraq's best option is to choose a fresh face to serve as the country's new leader.

A new leader will bring a sense of hope and optimism which are in dire need in Iraq today.

Iraq's last three former prime ministers – Ayad Allawi, Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nuri al-Maliki – failed to bring stability, tackle corruption and promote national reconciliation. They all sowed mistrust between Sunnis, Shias and Kurds.

Allawi, whose Iraqiya bloc won the parliamentary election by a narrow margin, had a chance to serve as a great leader when he was appointed interim prime minister from 2004 until 2005. But even with the support of the Americans, he could not bring stability to Iraq and instead destroyed Fallujah and Sunni strongholds.

He couldn't achieve national reconciliation. Now the Kurds, the Shia and Iran are wary of his support from former Baathists.

Jaafari, who heads a relatively small Shia party, has emerged as one of the contenders after winning a referendum by supporters of the radical Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. Jaafari's 13-month tenure was marked by a Sunni boycott of the government, mistrust among Kurds, widespread kidnappings and sectarian discord. Under his leadership, Iraq was on the verge of a civil war.

Incumbent premier Maliki, leader of the State of Law coalition, made a lot of enemies, especially with neighbouring countries. Rather than inviting Arab states to support Iraq politically and economically, he accused them of interfering in Iraqi affairs but never spoke of Iran.

He blamed Saudi Arabia and Syria for supporting terrorism after major bombings. He had trouble with Sunni Arabs and his leadership created schisms even within the Shia. He could not even win over Kurds, who saved his government from dissolving.

His decision to bring Iraqi forces to areas disputed between Kurds and Arabs inflamed tensions between the two ethnic groups.

Re-electing any of these three leaders will take Iraq back to square one. The former prime ministers currently jockeying for the post should recognise that it is in Iraq's best interest to compromise by stepping aside and allowing parliament to elect a new prime minister.

Out of respect for the will of people and democracy, the new prime minister should be from one of the winning lists – either State of Law, which won 89 parliamentary seats, or Iraqiya, which gained 91.

Even if he has not served before, an endorsement from a strong list will automatically give a new leader enormous respect and influence.

Maliki and Allawi are the front-runners in the competition and won the most votes of any candidate in Iraq. But this is because they held power, were well-known. In fact, more than 80 per cent of newly-elected legislators are new faces in the assembly, an indication that Iraqis want fresh politicians in power.

We have to ask ourselves why Maliki and Allawi want to be prime minister, and who would be best for the country. The two leaders are seeking another chance to hold power, even though they did not use it wisely in the past.

If they want stability for Iraq, they need to stop their quest for the premiership. Compromising and electing a new person to the post will cast them in a positive light and would also be good for Iraq.

Given their chequered histories many parties eye Maliki and Allawi with suspicion. Heavy political jockeying is under way as they try to secure support from wary potential allies.

A new candidate will not face such hurdles. To be sure, the nominee will need to be an experienced politician who is accepted by Iraq's most influential parties and groups. He should not have a history of divisiveness and should not be antagonistic. He should be willing and able to fend off foreign influence.

A fresh face will make people optimistic and prove that Iraq has new politicians, and is not always in the hands of a small group of leaders. Neighbouring countries will also give him a chance before judging him.

We need someone who can garner the support of Shia, Sunni and Kurds. A new leader will have a better chance of negotiating with rival political parties and forming a national unity government.

This is crucial for the future of Iraq, as history has shown us that a government cannot function unless all of the major parties and groups are involved in decision-making.

The new prime minister will have to deal with national reconciliation, corruption and security. The old leaders failed to achieve these goals, and if they are re-elected by parliament, Iraqis will only remember the past.

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