

Maliki Steps Aside for New Iraqi Prime Minister

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After eight years, Nuri al-Maliki resigns after initially saying he won't.

Nuri al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq for the last eight years, stepped down on August 14 after initially refusing to go. The appointment of Haider al-Abadi as his replacement is intended to break a political deadlock that has been paralysing attempts to repulse Sunni militants who have taken over areas north and west of Baghdad.

Iraq's top political positions are shared so that the president is a Kurd, the post of speaker is awarded to a Sunni Arab and the prime minister's job goes to a Shia. Nuri al-Maliki has held this last post for two terms, and he was pressing for a third, even though his critics held him at least partly responsible for radicalising Sunni Arabs by marginalising and persecuting their political leaders. With him out of the way, they believe, it could become easier for central government to build a consensus and galvanise support for the battle against militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria..

The Shia-led National Alliance bloc nominated an alternative, Abadi, formerly an ally of Maliki but a much less controversial figure. On August 11, President Mohammed Fuad Masum asked Abadi to form a government.

However, Maliki refused to go. Speaking late on August 10, he accused President Masum of breaching the constitution by attempting to deny him a third term as leader of the biggest parliamentary bloc, State of Law, another Shia-dominated coalition. Soon after Maliki's speech, troops and armoured vehicles were deployed close to Baghdad's Green Zone, where key government buildings are located. Early the following morning, central Baghdad was closed to allow thousands of Maliki supporters to call for a third term for him.

At this point, Ali al-Murshidi, from the Badr Organisation which is a member of Maliki's State of Law coalition, argued that the battle could now go to the courts, centring on whether State of Law or the National Alliance counted as the largest political bloc.

Speaking before Maliki decided to abandon his bid for a third term and back Abadi, political analyst Amir al-Saedi said it would be essential for the new government leaders to be gracious in victory. Otherwise, he warned, "we won't have a government that's capable of delivering the right policies, as there are forces - especially State of Law - that will obstruct this unless they are granted guarantees and privileges".

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