

New Iraqi Premier Named to End Maliki's Rule

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If it goes through, appointment will unblock Iraqi politics, though current prime minister hasn't conceded defeat yet.

Iraqi president Mohammed Fuad Masum has asked Haider al-Abadi to form a government, in a bid to break a deadlock that is 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 is pressing for a third, even though his critics believe he is partly to blame for radicalising Sunni Arabs by marginalising and persecuting their political leaders. With him out of the way, they believe, it would become easier for central government to build a consensus and enlist support in the battle against militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In a sign it recognised the problem, the Shia-led National Alliance bloc nominated an alternative, Abadi, formerly an ally of Maliki but a much less controversial figure.

On August 11, the official Iraqiya TV station showed President Masum signing instructions to form a government and handing them to Abadi, with senior National Alliance figures looking on.

Settling on Abadi as the Shia choice of prime minister could in theory make it easier to unblock the political process, and from there to start tackling the ISIS threat in earnest.

However, Maliki continues to stand firm.

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.

"The president has breached the constitution twice - once by failing to instruct the nominee of the biggest bloc to form a new government, and again by extending the [15-day] constitutional period for nomination [of a prime minister]," Maliki said, warning that this would have dire consequences for Iraq's future.

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.

Ali al-Murshidi, from the Badr Organisation which is a member of Maliki's State of Law coalition, argues that the fight to retain power is far from over, despite the backing Abadi has received.

"This matter has not ended yet," he said. "Maliki can file an objection with the federal court on the interpretation of 'biggest bloc'."

Maliki argues that following a parliamentary election this April, State of Law holds the most seats. The National Alliance believes it has the greater constitutional claim to be the major bloc.

Political analyst Amir al-Saedi agrees that Maliki still has a chance of hanging onto his job by appealing to the courts. And if Maliki loses, it is essential for Abadi and his allies to be gracious in victory.

Otherwise, Saedi warns, "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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