

Winning Iraq's Political Game

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Smaller parties should break stalemate by backing one of the two main parties.



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At the moment, all the participants in Iraq's deadlocked government negotiations seem to be engaged in a complex game.

Since the March parliamentary election, the competition has centred on the post of prime minister, with two frontrunners – the incumbent Nuri al-Maliki, who heads the State of Law bloc, and Ayad Allawi, who leads the Iraqiya bloc.

Other players are holding off from choosing which side to back. While they may be motivated by a desire to make the best possible choice, their hesitation to commit will only prolong the political stalemate.

This kind of situation fits a theory about human behaviour called the Nash Equilibrium. Named after John Forbes Nash, who won a Nobel prize in 1994 for devising it, the concept is of a game in which each player is assumed to know what the others' strategies are, and has nothing to gain by changing his own strategy unilaterally.

Seen through the prism of this game theory, Allawi can be said to be adopting the best possible approach by insisting on his right to form a government, given that his bloc won a slim majority of parliamentary seats.

Any move he makes will take account of Maliki's continuing aspiration to take the prime minister's job, as well as of decisions by other parties to stay out of the fight.

For his part, Maliki, too, is making the best decision he can by insisting on taking charge of forming a government. His strategy must also include a recognition of Allawi's intentions, and of the behaviour of other political groupings.

The other blocs can likewise be said to be making the optimal choice by staying out of the conflict, watching what moves Maliki and Allawi make, and making plans to support one or the other once they win.

Nash's theory thus seems an apt description of the current situation. But it need not remain like this.

Allawi and Maliki appear to have no choice but to stick to their positions and maintain the equilibrium. But other groups including the Kurds could gain a decisive advantage by upsetting the balance and stepping in as kingmakers.

Remaining neutral and waiting for a winner to emerge makes sense only if the confrontation is short-lived. That is no longer the case in Iraq. As tensions intensify between the two main blocs, those who remain outside will run the risk of becoming irrelevant to the solution.

If a third bloc takes the plunge and throws its weight behind either Allawi or Maliki, it could end up on the winning side and would then be in a position to extract commitments and take a leading role on the political scene. Even if it backed the wrong horse, the mathematics of Iraq's parliament mean it could set its own price for switching allegiance to the winner.

The Kurdish bloc and the other alliances thus have a real opportunity to seize the role of kingmaker and end the deadlock. It is an opportunity they should grab.

In situations of conflict, those who opt to stay in the middle ground or to remain outside are commonly reduced to the role of spectators.

And in any game, the spectators generally end up with nothing.

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