

How has the post-2003 ruling elite circle been established? Coalition formation patterns in the elections

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Abstract

In the context of post-conflict countries, it is imperative to examine the role of elections in the consolidation of social division and polarization among major ethnoreligious social groups in the aftermath of a significant regime change .

Electoral blocs formed in post-2003 Iraq are often understood as a case typical of the rise of identity politics in the post-conflict political vacuum; elections are employed as a tool for the mobilisation of the incumbent political ruling elite to consolidate and expand their supportive bases. However, the sectarian divide is not the sole driver of forming electoral coalitions since the 2010s.

The central research question guiding this study is to identify the factors that must be considered when explaining how political actors seek to mobilise voters and form alliances in parliament, and the reasons why post-2003 ruling elite circles enjoy their durability. This study elucidates the manner in which political parties expand their supportive bases, such as ideologies, common political targets, sectarian and ethnic origin, and shared political experiences. The study utilises data from the official website of the Iraqi High Electoral Commission, the profiles of the members of parliament published on the website of the parliament, candidates' posts in the Facebook and Twitter and news data.

The importance of this study lies in its ability to shed light on the establishment of the post-2003 ruling elite circle, its penetration of local politics from the vantage point, and its formation of coalition patterns to recruit local notables and absorb rising political figures. These patterns are facilitated by intra-sectarian and intra-local rivalries, and the provision of opportunities for power-sharing .

Keywords: election, ruling elite circle, coalition, power-sharing

كيف تشكلت النخبة الحاكمة بعد عام ٢٠٠٣؟ أنماط تشكيل التحالفات في الانتخابات

الأستاذة كيكو ساكاي

الأستاذة كيكو ساكاي أستاذة في جامعة تشيبا ومديرة مركز الدراسات العلانية

ملخص

في سياق دول ما بعد الصراع، من الضروري دراسة دور الانتخابات في ترسيخ الانقسام الاجتماعي والاستقطاب بين الفئات الاجتماعية الإثنية والدينية الرئيسية في أعقاب تغيير كبير في النظام.

دروست بکەن، هەر وەها ھۆکارەکانیش کە بازنەکانی نوخەبی دەسەڵاتدار لە دواى ٢٠٠٣ چێژ لە مانەویان وەرگیرن. ئەم لیکۆلێنەوێیە، شتواری فراوانکردنی بنکە پالپشتییەکانی لایەنە سیاسییەکان، وەک ئایدۆلۆژیا، ئامانجە سیاسییە ھاوبەشەکان، بنەچەى تائیفی و نەتەوێی و ئەزموونە سیاسییە ھاوبەشەکان روون دەکاتەوێ. توێژینەوێکە داتاکانی مألپەری فەرمى کۆمسیۆنى بالای ھەلبژاردنەکانی عێراق و پرۆفایلی ئەندامانی پەرلەمان کە لە مألپەری پەرلەمان بلاقراوەتەوێ و پۆستی کاندیدەکان لە فەیسبۆک و تویتەر و داتای ھەوألەکان کەلک وەر دەگرت.

گرنگی ئەم توێژینەوێیە لە توانیدایە بۆ روئینایی خستە سەر دامەزراندنی بازنەى نوخەبی دەسەڵاتدار لە دواى سالی ٢٠٠٣، دزەکردنی سیاسەتى ناوخۆی لە روانگەییەکی باشەوێ و پیکھینانی نەخشی ھاوبەیمانی بۆ دامەزراندنی کەسایەتییە دیارەکانی ناوخۆی و ھەلمژینی کەسایەتییە سیاسییە سەرھەلداوێکان. ئەم نەخشانە بەھۆی رکاھیری نێوان تائیفی و ناوخۆی و دابینکردنی دەرفەت بۆ ھاوبەشکردنی دەسەڵات ئاسانکاریان بۆ دەگرت.

وشەى سەرەکی: ھەلبژاردن، بازنەى نوخەبی دەسەڵاتدار، ھاوبەیمانی، دابەشکردنی دەسەڵات

Introduction

An election may be defined as a system by which the populace selects its representatives to serve in the legislative and/or executive branches of the state. In this sense, the electoral process is considered to be an important part of the democratic system. However, as Lust-Okar (2008:1) observes, "Examining participation in elections, political parties, and other 'democratically oriented' institutions through the lens of democratization is problematic". Recent studies on the elections in the Middle East have focused on elections in authoritarian regimes (competitive authoritarianism), as these regimes find the electoral system useful for maintaining their power and legitimacy and for their survival. Elections may enable authoritarian regimes to "come to 'know' social trends better and prevent resistance through the co-optation of key actors and their demands" (Cavatorta and Resta 2023:1).

This paper will examine the case of elections in post-2003 Iraq. While the majority of Arab states are characterised by authoritarian rule, post-2003 Iraq has adopted a "competitive" electoral system as part of the "democratisation" policy initiated by the United States, thereby ensuring the regular conduct of national elections. Notable electoral events include the constitutional assembly election in January 2005, followed by five national parliamentary elections in 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2021, and four provincial elections in 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2023. The electoral process also featured a constitutional referendum in 2005. The Global Report 2017, issued by the Center for Systematic Peace, categorises the Iraqi regime as "democratic" (Marshall and Marshall 2017:45), while the Democracy Index in 2023, conducted by the Economic Intelligence Unit, categorises it as "hybrid regimes".

Despite the success in introducing democracy as a regime and free election system as a basis for political democracy, the post-2003 political environment is considered far from free (Marshall and Marshall 2017:45). The Freedom House has categorised Iraq as "not free" in its "Global Freedom" judgement, and as "partially free" in its "Internet Freedom" judgement. The democratic system is characterised by a paucity of fundamental freedoms. A democratic system

that offers less personal freedom is often seen to exhibit a lack of adaptability and an incapacity to respond to social demands. This can result in public dissatisfaction with the regime, leading to the emergence of protest movements, which may sometimes include violent insurgencies, directed against the ruling political elites. The Global Report 2017 analyses Iraq as being highly fragile in terms of its security (in terms of both its effectiveness and its legitimacy), and its political legitimacy. By contrast, Iraq is less fragile in terms of social level (in terms of both its effectiveness and its legitimacy). The Democracy Index, a comprehensive metric of democratic performance, assigns Iraq a high rating in the categories of "electoral process and pluralism" (5.25/10) and "political participation" (6.11/10). However, it scores lower in "political culture" (1.88) and "civil liberty" (1.18).

The data demonstrate that post-2003 Iraq has established institutions to facilitate citizen participation in the political decision-making system, thereby compromising individual freedom to engage in such decision-making. This tendency has been intermittently reinforced, as evidenced by the decline in the overall score from 4.01 in 2007 to 2.88 in 2023. This decline is primarily attributable to the diminution in the score for "political culture" (from 5.63 to 1.88). "Civil liberty" (from 4.12 to 1.18) (Kekio 2007), due to "extensive corruption limited transparency and the sporadic application of the rule of law" (Yousif and Davis 2011, p. 248). This decline corresponds with a decrease in voter turnout in the elections for the Council of Representatives in Iraq, from 80% in the inaugural national election in December 2005 to 43.3% in the fifth election in 2021.

While elections in Iraq can function as a democratic process of competition among political actors eager to engage in post-war politics, they can also be employed as a tool for the mobilisation of the incumbent political ruling elite to consolidate and expand their supportive bases in authoritarian regimes. In the context of post-conflict countries, it is imperative to examine the role of elections in the consolidation of social division and polarization among major ethno/religious social groups in the aftermath of a significant regime change. The hasty introduction of a new electoral system in post-conflict states can exacerbate social division due to a political and social vacuum. As Samuels explains, "elections will amount to ... a snapshot census on ethnicity" (Samuels 2009:184).

Indeed, the findings derived from the post-2003 Iraqi elections appear to reflect the demographic balance of the country's sectarian and ethnic population, providing an exemplary manifestation of Bookman's theoretical conceptualisation of "demographic struggle for power". When an electoral system frequently fails to function as a means for reconciliation or mediation of social contention (al-Qarawee 2014:3), communal affiliation – often sectarian identity – propels political conflict via elections in which political parties endeavour to procure substantial blocks of votes through a diverse array of social networks. Electoral blocs formed in the early period of post-2003 Iraq are often understood as a case typical of the rise of identity politics in the post-conflict political vacuum, experiencing harsh civil war during 2006-07.

However, the paper posits that there are other factors that must be considered when explaining how political actors seek to mobilise voters and form alliances to secure a majority in parliament, suggesting that the sectarian divide is not the sole driver of this behaviour since 2010. This paper elucidates the aforementioned factors, encompassing the manner in which political parties establish and expand their supportive bases, such as ideologies, common political targets, sectarian and ethnic origin, and shared political experiences. By examining the evolution of

coalition formation in the Iraqi electoral process following 2003, and the manner in which the electoral system influences the mobilisation of voters and the expansion of the supportive bases for elections by political parties, this chapter analyses the formation of the post-2003 ruling political elite through the electoral process.

Following the post-2003 events, politicians who had been absent from Iraq for decades returned to the country with the aim of gaining power through the electoral system. In order to do so, they sought to mobilise voters along ethno-sectarian social divisions, thus leading to the emergence of the "muhasasa" system. Conversely, the opposition also utilised the electoral process, with varying degrees of success in challenging the ruling elites. This was a delicate balancing act, oscillating between active participation in the political arena and maintaining a stance as an actor within the protest movement.

Elections are of significance not only because of the manner in which they dictate the composition of the government and the direction of policy, but also because of the manner in which they demonstrate the behaviour and reaction of the electorate to the existing circle of decision makers. A comprehensive analysis of the electoral process is therefore essential to understand the public's perception of the post-2003 political landscape in Iraq. This analysis should focus on how voters express their political will through elections, the extent to which they are able to reflect their will in the formation of political parties or electoral blocs, and the extent to which the results of their votes are influenced by the ruling groups in power.

The paper commences with a delineation of the evolution of electoral processes in Iraq following 2003, with a particular emphasis on the establishment of a post-2003 ruling political circle predominantly comprising politicians hailing from the al-Dawa party and ISCI during the second term of the Maliki administration (2011-2014). The author then examines how the major political parties attempted to form electoral blocs to expand and strengthen their supportive body and collect more votes, merging minor parties and independent candidates to establish the incumbent ruling political circle.

(1) The formation of the post-2003 ruling political circle: 2003-2014

Subsequent to the US invasion of Iraq and regime change in 2003, a free election system was introduced in Iraq to elect representatives for both national and provincial councils. Through the electoral system, politicians and political parties endeavoured to gain a majority of the votes, and formed a grand electoral coalition to be a leading party for forming the next government. Following the legal acceptance of the coalition formation post-election in 2010, the significance of pre-electoral negotiation and arrangement among the political parties diminished, leading to a decline in politicians' responsiveness to voters' demands in the formation of post-electoral coalitions.

The subsequent sections analyse the transformation of electoral coalition-making patterns and demonstrate how the political parties were unsuccessful in achieving genuine consensus-building among the various political groups. The first section details the election of the constitutional assembly and the inaugural national election for the council of representatives, highlighting the mobilisation of the sectarian divide in the early stage of post-2003 political reconstruction. The second section focuses on the transformation of the power balance among major political parties and the consolidation of the power base for the post-2003 political ruling

circle.

<introduction of election system in Iraq: US intension vs Shi'ite religious authority>

The election system was initiated by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 15 June 2004. While the CPA advocated for the adoption of the caucus system for the parliamentary elections, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a marja'i taqlid in Najaf, advocated for an immediate direct election for the Iraqi parliament, insisting that the US permit the Iraqi people to elect their representatives, rather than the caucus system that the US had planned (Rahimi 2007: 8-9).

The election for the constitutional assembly was held on 30 January 2005. The adoption of a proportional representation (PR) system, underpinned by national lists and a single electoral constituency, was a key recommendation of the UN electoral assistance team¹. This approach proved conducive to the formation of a substantial electoral bloc comprising Shi'ite political groups. The formation of a significant electoral bloc, known as the Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA), was encouraged by the spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, with the objective of uniting Shi'ite voters and participating in the electoral process. This bloc comprised prominent ex-patriate Shi'ite-based Islamist parties, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Da'wa party, in addition to secular Shi'ite-origin politicians who favour a pro-US stance. The electoral bloc secured 48% of the votes, thereby attaining a single-bloc majority². This was followed by a grand coalition (Kurdistan Alliance) between the two primary Kurdish parties, i.e. KDP and PUK, which collectively garnered one-fourth of the votes. The sectarian/ethnic nature of the aforementioned leading electoral blocs can be understood as a strategy on the part of these parties to gain a majority in parliament by mobilising the ethno-sectarian factor, setting aside their ideological, diplomatic policy, background and support differences.

The sectarian/ethnic character of the aforementioned leading electoral blocs can be interpreted as a strategy employed by these parties to secure a majority in parliament by mobilising the ethno-sectarian factor, setting aside their ideological differences, diplomatic policies, background of activities and supportive bases. For Shi'ite-based political parties, it was evident that their sectarian affiliation as 'Shi'ites' was the sole factor that would enable them to achieve a demographic majority in parliament.

The results of the first national election for the Council of Representatives (parliament) in December 2005 demonstrated a heightened ethno-sectarian tendency, with the UIA securing 41% of the votes and emerging as the leading party, followed by the Kurdish bloc with 22%. The sectarian nature of the election was further entrenched by the emergence of two Sunni-based electoral blocs: the Islamist-based Iraqi Accord Front and the secular-based Iraqi Front of National Dialogue. Collectively, these two blocs garnered 19% of the total votes, predominantly in Sunni-majority governorates such as Anbar, Ninawa, and Salah al-Din. This development followed a pattern of non-participation by Sunni-based parties or individuals in the previous election in January 2005. This non-participation was primarily attributed to the ongoing counterinsurgency

¹Subsequently, the electoral legislation was revised with the objective of abolishing the single-constituency system and distributing the 230 seats in the Council of Representatives amongst the 18 provinces based on population.

² See table 1 for the number of the seats gained by major electoral blocs.

military operations targeting Sunni-majority governorates, such as Anbar, in November 2004. These operations effectively prevented voters from participating in the election and led to a significant boycott by Sunni-based politicians. Voters from Sunni-based governorates predominantly cast their votes for the non-sectarian, secular electoral bloc Iraq National Accord (also referred to as Iraqiya or Wataniya) in the January 2005 election. Subsequent to the establishment of these two Sunni-based electoral blocs, Iraqiya experienced a decline in its representation, with its share of seats decreasing from 40 to 25 in the subsequent national election held in December 2005.

The UIA, a leading party with the largest number of parliamentary seats, adopted a consensus-style politics rather than a majoritarian style (Visser 2014: 133-134), with ministers being nominated with a view to maintaining an ethno-sectarian balance. The composition of the council of ministers in 2006 reflected the numbers of seats that the major electoral blocs gained¹. This power-sharing pattern, as opposed to a 'take all' approach, enabled the winning factions to select their partners from among different sectarian and ethnic opposition parties. This system, known as Muhassasa, functioned as a mechanism for the co-option of potential rivalries from diverse factions, thereby facilitating the formation of an elite pact.

<split of sect-based electoral bloc and establishment of post-2003 political ruling circle through post-electoral coalition>

Following the securing of the majority of the UIA in parliament, however, the member parties of the aforementioned grant coalition began to compete against one another for leadership, thereby indicating that intrasectarian rivalries became of greater importance than intersectorian ones in their efforts to consolidate power within parliament. The al-Da'wa party, having secured a strong position in many of the southern governorates during the provincial parliamentary elections of 2009, opted for an independent electoral bloc, forming the State of Law Coalition (SLC), a strategic move that ultimately led to the establishment of a new alliance separate from the UIA. In the subsequent parliamentary election in 2010, the rifts between al-Da'wa and the other member parties of the UIA persisted, with the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI) establishing a new electoral bloc, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA)², encompassing the al-Sadr Tendency and several factions from al-Da'wa Party, such as Ibrahim Ja'afari. Consequently, Iraqiya (an Iraqi national movement led by Iyad Allawi) secured the largest number of seats, surpassing the SLC by two seats.

The primary factor contributing to Iraqiya's triumph was its emphasis on secularism and its critical stance against sectarianism, which resonated with voters weary of the prevailing violent sectarianism and civil war during 2006-2007, and who aspired to overcome the sectarian divide. The electoral law was changed in September 2008, shifting from a closed list system to an open list system, a change which Ansary and Rasheed attribute to the victory of both Iraqiya and SLC

¹ In the Council of Ministers and the Presidential Councils in 2006, 17 individuals from the UIA were nominated for ministerial or presidential posts, constituting 39% of the total nominations. This was followed by the Kurdish Alliance, with eight nominations, the Sunni-based Iraqi Accord Front, with seven nominations, and Iraqiya, with four nominations.

² In the provincial election of 2009, ISCI established an electoral bloc known as Martyr of Mihrab.

(2008, p. 10-11). This new system permitted voters to cast their ballots for electoral blocs or individual candidates, thus allowing for a more diverse and nuanced expression of political preference. The Iraqiya list included prominent figures from the political sphere, including former ministers and MPs, who garnered significant popular support.

However, following the election, Iraqiya was unable to assume a leadership role in the post-election administration, as this was instead assumed by the SLC and INA, who established a grand coalition with 159 seats to form the government (Stewart-Jolley 2021:10-11). The Supreme Court subsequently determined that the post-election SLC-INA coalition was legally accepted, thereby sanctioning its formation of the government.

Following a period of political vacuum spanning 10 months, Nuri al-Maliki, a prominent figure within the SLC, was appointed to the role of prime minister for a second term. The Supreme Court's decision empowered political parties to align with the majority post-election, irrespective of the initial electoral outcome. The formation of post-election coalitions subsequently established a pattern of government formation, whereby the formation of a government is achieved through post-election negotiations and adjustments. Consequently, the political elite originating from the UIA continued to assume a pivotal role in orchestrating relations among competing political parties within the parliament.

In the aftermath of attaining power by a narrow margin, the Maliki administration (2010-2014) repudiated its conciliatory policy towards political rivals. At the commencement of Maliki's second term, 50% of ministerial posts were allocated to former UIA electoral blocs, while only 21% of ministerial posts were earmarked for Iraqiya, representing a proportion less than its share of parliamentary seats (27% of the total). Established politicians from Sunni-based political parties were excluded from the ruling circles, such as Tariq Hashimi and Rafi' al-Issawi, both from the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party, while only a few Sunni independent politicians or those from minor parties were appointed as ministers.

With an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister, Maliki and the SLC stood at the third election for the council of representatives in April 2014. The SLC emerged victorious, securing a substantial margin of nearly three times the number of votes garnered by the second-placed bloc (Ahrar, led by al-Sadr Tendency). However, the IS occupation of Mosul and other northern and western regions of Iraq in June 2014 led to a shift in the political landscape. As a result, Haidar Abadi from the SLC was selected as prime minister, replacing Maliki and receiving support from the US and the UN.

The series of military operations to liberate urban areas in the north and west from ISIS control, in conjunction with the rise of nationwide support for national defence against ISIS, had a considerable impact on public attitudes towards the government and ruling political parties. The rise in public support and trust in the military organisations that had been instrumental in the anti-ISIS military operation led to the rise of the political parties to which those military organisations belonged. This shift in the popular preference of the political parties was reflected in the 2018 elections, after the Abadi administration declared its victory over ISIS.

(2) Formation of post-2003 ruling political circle: 2014-2023

In the period between 2014 and 2023, the post-2003 ruling elite circle began to experience challenges from both external and parliamentary forces. Moreover, the electoral system underwent

numerous modifications. A significant development was the emergence of the Tishreen movement in 2019, which led to demands for an early national election in 2021. The 2021 election saw the adoption of the SNTV system, which superseded the PR system. This shift proved advantageous for local political parties. In both elections, the opposition party assumed the leading position in parliament for the first time since the leadership of the ruling political elites, originating from the UIA, had persisted since 2003. However, the incumbent political elites were able to regain their ruling position through the formation of a post-electoral coalition.

<rise of the militant-based political parties and increase of popular distrust against the government: 2018-2021>

In the period preceding the 2018 election, significant electoral blocs underwent a process of fragmentation, renaming and reorganization. A notable example of this phenomenon is the division of the SLC, the mainstream of the al-Da'wa Party, into two distinct groups: the Nasr bloc, led by Haidar al-Abadi, and the SLC, led by Maliki. A similar schism occurred within Muwatin, a former INA, giving rise to two distinct factions: the Hikma bloc (National Wisdom Movement), led by Ammar al-Hakim, and the Fatah bloc, led by the Badr Organisation. These divisions emerged in response to the emergence of militia forces in the anti-ISIS effort. Abadi's bloc anticipated a popular victory by accentuating his leadership as a prime minister in military operations against ISIS. In contrast, Badr and Maliki emphasised their leadership in the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), which primarily comprised Iran-supported militia under their respective political parties. The PMU is not a unified entity, but rather comprises four distinct categories: brigades operating under the command of pro-IRGC militant groups, volunteers who have responded to al-Sistani's call and are under the authority of religious leaders, government-led groups that include Sunni militants, and the militant wing of al-Sadr Tendency (Saraya al-Salam) (Knights, Malik and Al-Tamimi 2020).

In the May 2018 election, the Al-Sadr tendency secured first place (14.4% of total votes) under the Sairun coalition, which also encompassed the Iraqi Communist Party. The second position was attained by Fatah, which garnered 13.2% of the total votes, thereby reflecting Badr's popularity within the leadership of PMU. The emergence of new groups indicates a decline in the influence of the major incumbent ruling political parties. Despite Sairun's attempts to establish a post-election coalition with Nasr and Hikma, Maliki's SLC successfully enlisted Fatah and other smaller blocs and individuals to join his coalition (Bina, Construction Bloc) (Mansour 2019:11-12), resulting in the formation of the largest coalition in parliament. The nomination of Adil Abdul Mahdi, a former senior member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), as prime minister after a period of five months since the election, marks the first instance of a prime minister from a party outside the al-Dawa Party. However, it signifies the perpetuation of the rotational leadership within the ruling elites since 2003.

<parliament without reflecting the votes in the election: 2021->

The fifth election for the council of representatives was held in October 2021, with the single non-

transferable vote (SNTV) system replacing the previous proportional representation (PR) system¹. The SNTV system has been argued to better reflect "'communities of interest" more than the closed-list PR system' (Rehfeld 2005: 5). This alteration in electoral legislation had a substantial impact on the behaviour of both candidates and voters, as well as the outcome of the election. Under the SNTV system, candidates with a community-based socio-political background gain an advantage in electoral competition. The introduction of SNTV has been shown to provide incentives for cultivating personal votes and emphasising locality (Shugart et al. 2005), thereby producing 'strong incentives for candidates to build their personal reputation' (Jang and Lin 2019).

The advent of the SNTV system engendered a favourable environment for the al-Sadr Tendency, which has historically enjoyed a robust support base in Baghdad and the southern governorates, as well as among disaffected youth and impoverished supporters since the 1990s (Sakai 2023). In the present electoral contest, the al-Sadr bloc secured approximately one-fourth of the total seats, marking a 35% increase from the previous election. This was followed by Taqaddum (Progressive Alliance), a Sunni-based secular coalition led by Muhammad al-Halbusi, which garnered around 11% of the total seats. The SLC and KDP each secured 10% of the total seats (Sakai 2023). In comparison with the previous election, Fatah lost two-thirds of its seats (gaining only 5%), while Nasr, Wataniya (former Iraqiya) and Quwa, led by al-Hikma, lost all of their seats. This outcome indicates a definitive defeat of the former core groups of UIA.

Despite the fact that the al-Sadr Bloc secured the greatest number of seats in parliament, it was obliged to form a coalition once more in order to obtain a majority. In an effort to garner support, the al-Sadr Bloc approached the Sunni blocs, such as al-Taqaddum, and the Kurdish blocs. However, the Coordination Framework (CF), a post-election majority coalition in the parliament led by Fatah and SLC, emphasised the necessity of establishing a consensus government that incorporates prominent Shi'ite-based political parties, maintaining the muhassasa power-sharing system (al-Rubaie 2022). Frustrated with the impasse, the al-Sadr bloc withdrew its members of parliament in June 2022, leaving the CF as an unrivaled majority coalition in the parliament (al-Rubaie 2022). The nomination of Muhammad Shi'a al-Sudani as prime minister was met with general approval, primarily due to the fact that al-Sudani was the first prime minister to have a strong connection to Iraqi society, attributed as his active involvement in opposition activities in the Marsh area prior to 2003.

While the Maliki-led SLC played a significant role in the formation of the CF in parliament in 2021, the Badr-led Fatah demonstrated its strength in the local elections in the governorates. Although no significant change was observed to challenge the dominance of the CF in the provincial elections in December 2023, the results indicate a shift in the power balance within the CF. The 'We Build' (Nabni) coalition, a modified version of Fatah led by Badr Organization, secured first place in five governorates in the south, surpassing the SLC and other competitors. The 'We Build' coalition secured a total of 43 seats, while the SLC obtained 35. Consequently, the post-2003 ruling coalition, which is led by former UIA Islamist parties, has

¹The 2021 election introduced a SNTV system that divided constituencies into 83 districts, with 2-18 electoral constituencies in one governorate. However, a new electoral law was introduced in May 2023, which established each governorate as a single electoral constituency. This shift has been interpreted as creating a disadvantage for small-size parties (Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, 2023)..

maintained its position and continues to hold a stable majority in both national and local politics.

(3) Patterns of coalition formation: an analysis of how political parties have succeeded or failed in forming a grand electoral coalition

The majority of the post-2003 major political parties were comprised of those who had been in exile for a considerable period and had lost their supportive bases or had no local bases inside Iraq after a prolonged absence from actual activities within domestic society. Consequently, these parties tended to rely on ethno-sectarian identity as a means of mobilising voters. The sectarian identity of "Shi'ite" is the most straightforward demographic factor to secure a majority. Conversely, other parties were compelled to utilise diverse strategies to expand their support base, if they could not rely on religious, sectarian or ethnic factors to secure a majority. A study of the political landscape of Iraq subsequent to 2003 reveals a recurrent pattern of competition among various Shi'ite-based coalitions. An analysis of the coalition-formation process reveals that the ethno-sectarian factor does not invariably serve as an effective mobilisation strategy for voters. Rather, a multifaceted approach is employed to ensure the formation of a substantial coalition.

The subsequent section will focus on how the UIA-origin coalition of expatriate-led political parties succeeded in maintaining its coalition and expanding its membership, without relying exclusively on the ethno-sectarian factor. In addition, it will examine how the challengers sought to form a larger coalition without relying on the ethno-sectarian factor. The initial case under scrutiny is Iraqiya, under the leadership of a former expatriate of Shi'ite origin who refused to join the UIA and instead pursued a secular agenda.

The second case under consideration is the case of SLC which has effectively retained its leadership position in maintaining a grand coalition by utilising the framework of the UIA and the patron-client network of former Prime Minister Nuri Maliki.

<Case of Iraqiya: relying fame of the candidates from non-UIA coalition>

The Iraqiya electoral bloc, which was formed under the leadership of Iyad Allawi, a former member of the Ba`th party who had opposed Saddam's regime (Sakai 1998: 83), has competed against the dominance of the UIA and the UIA-originated Shi'ite-based electoral blocs. The Iraqiya has advocated a secular stance. When the UIA emerged as a coalition of Shi'ite parties led by Islamist factions, Iraqiya was able to carve out a niche as a representative voice for non-Islamists and non-Shi'ite communities in the January 2005 elections, garnering support from Sunni voters and secularists. However, it lost its supporters from Sunni regions in the election in December 2005, following the emergence of Sunni-based electoral blocs such as IAF and IFND. Sunni supporters of Iraqiya subsequently gravitated towards Sunni-dominant local parties, such as the Awakening Council in Anbar and the Hadba Party in Ninawa. In the subsequent national election of 2010, Iraqiya endeavoured to regain its electoral base and expand its coalition with Sunni-based political parties.

The formation of its coalition is characterised by a loose alliance relationship that guarantees the autonomy of the organisations and independents it takes in, leveraging their fame. Consequently, there is minimal continuity among the member organisations. A mere 6% of the victors from Iraqiya in the 2010 election had previously held office under the same Iraqiya banner in the preceding elections. The coalition's candidate recruitment strategy primarily targeted three

distinct categories. Firstly, the well-known incumbent political elites from major Sunni-based parties, such as IAF, IFND and offspring of the Awakening Council, were recruited to absorb their supportive body.

A second pattern was the invitation of political figures within the coalition who have close connections with local political parties and groups in each governorate, as it was expected that voters would favour candidates who could reflect their local demands. The affiliation of politicians with influential tribal groups in the region is a significant factor in the acquisition of votes.

In a similar manner, Iraqiya placed significant emphasis on the candidates' involvement in and contribution to local politics within their respective communities. In the 2010 election, several members of the governorate council were recruited who had emerged victorious in the provincial election in 2009. Of the 91 victors from Iraqiya, six were elected members of the provincial councils in January 2009, predominantly from Sunni-concentrated regions and Baghdad. It is noteworthy that while most of these individuals changed their affiliation with the electoral bloc, they did not alter their constituency; that is, their localness was recognised, rather than their party affiliation.

To summarise, Iraqiya adopted a strategy of forming a new coalition with a combination of various identities which the voters considered to be crucial for expressing their political aspirations in the north-central regions. This strategy was based on loose cohesion, nominating political figures rooted in the local society, as well as political elites.

<Case of SLC: gatekeeper of the post-2003 ruling elites system based on muhassasa>

In contrast to the aforementioned cases of challengers, the SLC, under the leadership of Maliki's faction from the al-Da'wa Party, successfully established a ruling coalition through the muhassasa system, allocating positions and sharing power through a broad coalition based on Maliki's network. This does not imply that Maliki/SLC possessed a robust and substantial support base within Iraq. Indeed, the al-Da'wa Party encountered a paucity of support at the provincial level in the early stages of post-2003 electoral politics.

In the December 2005 election, the al-Da'wa party and its associated organisations, including the al-Dawa-Iraqi Organisation (al-Dawa-tanzim al-Iraq), secured 22% of the total seats won by the UIA. However, al-Dawa demonstrated weakness in the initial provincial election of 2005 in comparison to the al-Sadr Tendency, as well as to ISCI and home-grown local parties, which exhibited greater success¹. In an effort to reverse this situation, al-Dawa underwent a restructuring of its coalition pattern, leading to the formation of the SLC, a decision that resulted in its departure from the UIA in both the 2009 and 2010 elections. In the subsequent national election of 2010, it secured 89 seats, a figure that represented a threefold increase compared to its previous electoral performance. A notable distinction between the Iraqiya and the SLC coalition patterns is that the former incorporates a diverse range of parties from the non-UIA coalition,

¹ The al-Sadr Tendency achieved a resounding electoral success, securing more than four-fifths of the vote in Maysan and Dhi Qar, traditionally their most successful governorates. In Muthanna, the least successful governorate, the Tendency garnered 46.1% of the vote. SCIRI secured a total of 195 seats, while al-Da'wa attained only 42. In the governorates of Babil, Qadisiyya, Basra, Maysan, and Wasit, home-grown local parties emerged victorious.

while the latter exclusively engages with those who share congruent ideological and political orientations with the UIA.

Another salient feature is that, while there was a strong continuity of SLC members up to the 2010 election, there is a discernible gap between the composition of the SLC between before and after 2010. While it is true that two-thirds of MPs from the Da'wa Party elected in the 2005 election were re-elected in 2010, only two of them were re-elected in the elections that took place after 2014. This suggests that the 2010 election acted as a pivotal moment for the Dawa-led electoral coalition, leading to a transformation into a network of Maliki's supporters.

Furthermore, Maliki was successful in expanding the coalition to include various groups within the ISCI-led blocs, a development that was facilitated by his military operations against anti-regime insurgencies. The SLC included the Badr Organisation, which had functioned as the military wing of SCIRI (later ISCI) prior to 2003 and had served as one of the most formidable forces within the ISCI-led coalitions until the 2013 provincial election. This development occurred in the context of the Maliki regime's reliance on pro-Iran paramilitary organisations, such as the Badr Organisation, for its military suppression of opposition militant groups, including the Mahdi Army, and insurgencies in Sunni-based areas during the period 2007-2013 (Mansour 2017).

The relationship between Maliki and Badr intensified further following the war against IS (2014-17), during which they played a leading role in the PMU in conducting military operations against IS. Despite Badr's establishment of its own electoral coalition, Fatah, following the fourth national election in 2018, it collaborated with SLC to form the post-electoral grand coalition, Bina after 2018 and CF after 2021. These coalitions were successful in maintaining their ruling position as a majority in parliament. Maliki and his coalition, SLC, continue to play a crucial role as a key negotiator in maintaining the incumbent post-2003 ruling political circle.

Conclusions

The political landscape of Iraq has been shaped significantly by the influence of the al-Da'wa-led political coalition, which has dominated national politics for the past two decades in the aftermath of the war. This coalition has established a ruling elite circle that has dominated post-2003 politics, with expatriates occupying key positions. These individuals have utilised religious authority to legitimise their rule and expand their supportive networks. They have been successful in penetrating local politics from the above, and in establishing coalition patterns to recruit local notables and absorb the rising political figures, making use of intra-sectarian and intra-local rivalries and offering chances for power-sharing. Legal decisions that enabled the formation of a government by a post-electoral coalition further entrenched the post-2003 ruling elite circle.

The emergence of the al-Sadr Tendency following the 2018 and 2021 elections can be interpreted as a manifestation of mounting discontent among the youth, educated elites, and marginalised poor. This development highlighted the regime's inability to address the public's demands. al-Sadr Tendency frequently oscillates between the roles of a formal political party and a movement organisation that operates outside of the official institutional framework, leading to a withdrawal from parliament. Moreover, the immaturity of protest movements in institutionalizing their organisation has left electoral politics in Iraq exposed to the machinations of the ruling

political elite, lacking in social reflexivity.

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