
IRAQ'S MALIKI SIDELINED AS KURDS AND SUNNIS SEEK SADR COALITION

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Iraq's Kurdish and Sunni blocs have expressed their willingness to form a coalition with election winner Moqtada Al Sadr, an indication that former Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, who is seeking power, could lose his grip over the country's political scene.

Mr Al Sadr's Sairoon bloc and Mr Al Maliki's State of Law coalition have been competing to strike a deal with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as well as Sunni blocs to establish the biggest ruling alliance in parliament.

"There are signs of agreement between the Kurds and the Sunnis to ally with Sairoon," Raed Fahmi, a prominent politician in Sairoon's bloc said on Sunday.

Yet, Kurdish parties will play a central role in the formation of the next government as they collectively secured over 40 seats in the May elections. They have yet to officially announce their alliance.

The Kurdish parties have set conditions for allying with the major blocs, PUK leader Arez Abdullah said in a statement.

"Our conditions are constitutional and include the existence of a government with a true national partnership that is in balance with the constitution," Mr Abdullah said, adding that his party will ally with the bloc that is "consistent with our political vision".

The development is seen as a blow to Mr Al Maliki's efforts as he seeks to gain support from the northern Iraqi parties. During his time in power, he was criticised for alienating Sunnis and Kurds by excluding them from key positions and undermining power-sharing in Iraq.

May's parliamentary elections saw electoral lists led Mr Al Sadr and Iranian-backed militia chief Hadi Al Amiri win the largest number of seats out of the 329 seat house.

Mr Al Sadr, who is leading a quartet of major parties with 136 seats, needs to secure 28 more to form a parliamentary majority.

Kurdish parties have previously been in talks with Mr Al Maliki to join his State of Law bloc, which won 26 seats, along with Mr Al Amiri's Fateh bloc which won 47 seats.

The two proposed coalitions account for around 249 seats between them, meaning that 80 seats

held by smaller parties and individuals would hold the balance of power.

But there is no word on how close to an agreement the parties are, although officials from the two blocs are expected to visit Iraqi Kurdistan next week in hopes of announcing a deal.

Mr Al Maliki is a small player in the Iraqi parliament, with three or four seats out of his bloc who are loyal to him, said Michael Knights, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"However, hes a natural politician, so he can bring people together and make deals, and this is why you talk to him," Mr Knights said, adding that he would have a limited role if Mr Al Sadr formed a government.

Iraqi President Fuad Masum held talks on Friday with Prime Minister Haider Al Abadi on the latest political developments, stressing the need to speed up the negotiation process to form the largest bloc in government.

The results of May's elections were only ratified by the supreme court on August 19 following allegations of fraud forced a partial recount of ballots.

Mr Al Abadi is heading a fragile caretaker government until its replacement can be agreed and has already had to contend with mass protests across the south at the state of basic government services.

The court's decision paves the way for Mr Masum to summon lawmakers to an inaugural session of the new, 329-seat house. In theory, parliament should then proceed to elect a speaker, a president and a prime minister, who will, in turn, form a new government within 90 days.

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