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## **IRAQ'S POLITICAL RIVALS AGREE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM AND DISTRIBUTION OF MINISTRIES**

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BAGHDAD: Iraq's political rivals have agreed on the shape of the next government, the program of the designated prime minister and the distribution of some ministries, key negotiators told Arab News on Sunday.

The new government is expected to be in place within two weeks, negotiators said. The progress will be welcome news for Iraqis whose country is swamped with challenges from rebuilding after Daesh to drastically needed improvements in basic infrastructure.

The progress comes after months of deadlock followed elections in May, with the two main Shiite-led alliances vying to control the new parliament.

Last week there was a breakthrough when Reform, led by cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr and the Iranian-backed Al-Binaa came together to form the largest parliamentary bloc.

They agreed to back the Shiite veteran politician and former vice president, Adel Abdul Mahdi, as the next prime minister.

Barham Salih, the new president, assigned Abdul Mahdi on Wednesday to form a government within 30 days.

Negotiators from both sides told Arab News that the government program has been agreed and is a combination of three documents provided by the two alliances and Abdul Mahdi.

The alliances gave him one year to implement the program or his government will be overthrown, negotiators said.

It focuses on providing the much-needed resources to develop water and electricity projects and the creation of a reconstruction council for the provinces affected by the war against Daesh and areas neglected as a result of the fighting.

The program focusses heavily on developing the economy and diversifying state revenues away from reliance on the oil industry.

The government will aim to restrain the military power of tribes and militias and impose the rule of law in all Iraqi cities.

On foreign relations, all have agreed that Iraq should be open to regional and international relations without determinants and should stick to a policy of non alignment.

Most of these plans are strategic and need a long time to achieve any of its aims, but after months we will see something on the ground for sure, an Al-Binnaa alliance negotiator told Arab News.

Abdul Mahdi agreed to resign if he fail after a year and all of us agree on this.

The new government will consist of 22 ministries, three deputies for the prime minister and two deputies for the president. It will include representatives from all Iraqs communities - Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, as per the Iraqi constitution.

Negotiators said no final agreements have been made on the names of candidates for each post.

The oil, foreign and interior ministries will be for Shiites, defense for Sunnis and finance for the Kurds.

The prime ministers deputies will be a Shiite, a Sunni and a Kurd and they will separately oversee oil and energy, security and economic affairs.

The three PMs deputies could be ministers who will take these responsibilities in addition to their ministries, to save money, a negotiator said.

The most prominent Iran-backed Shiite armed factions, Badr Organization and Assaib Ahl Al-Haq, whose MPs make up the backbone of Al-Binnaa, are competing to get the interior ministry.

The two groups also both want to control the transport ministry, which Iran has already tried to guarantee for one of its allies.

The outgoing prime minister, Haider Al-Abadi, and Falih Al-Fayadh, a former national security advisor are squaring off for the foreign ministry.

No names have been put forward for defense and finance so far.

There are points or a price placed on each ministry or a senior position and each point is equal to a seat in the parliament. For example, the price of a sovereign ministry is 12 points and so on, an Al-Binnaa negotiator told Arab News.

Al-Sadr on Saturday called on Abdul Mahdi to nominate independent ministers for the security ministries and other senior posts to ensure their independence in decision-making. But his partners on both sides refused his suggestion.

A Reform alliance negotiator told Arab News that this point is still under discussions.

It makes no sense for all ministers to be independent, the negotiator said.

The government will be attacked by all blocs as they will not feel that this is their government and they have to protect it.

We may agree on accepting some independent names but not for all.

An Al-Binnaa negotiator said Sadrs suggestion to nominate independent ministers is not accepted and non-negotiable.

The nominated ministers will be technocrat but they are not independent.

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