Iraq Election Sets Off New Political Tussle

By [Abdu Rahman](#) and [Dahr Jamail](#)

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BAGHDAD – The March elections have only deepened political divisions, and brought more violence.

Violent incidents come now amid tensions fueled by post-election arrests of victorious MPs, and disputes over vote fraud.

Incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has successfully appealed to the Supreme Court to disqualify more than 50 candidates on the opposition list, accusing them of being former members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party.

Leaders from Maliki's group declined to talk to IPS, saying they were busy with meetings to form alliances for the next government.

Members of former interim prime minister Ayad Allawi's list of the Iraqiya Party, that won 91 parliamentary seats to 89 for Maliki's State of Law party, were more forthcoming.

"We have a national project to reform the political process, including the starting point for reform of the Iraqi situation, and we will work to promote the reality of Iraq for the better," Khalil Ismail al-Qubaisi from the Allawi list told IPS at his office in Baghdad.

> "We believe that the Iraqiya List having these goals was the real reason for our success in the elections, and will bring us success in the formation of coalitions with the rest of the lists.
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> "The Iraqi List is a list of Iraqi nationals and is a move away from sectarianism, and its candidates include all Iraqis," Qubaisi told IPS. "We contain Sunni, Shia, Kurdish, and Christians from all denominations, and our goals are political reform, including repair of the security situation, and improving the living conditions of Iraqi citizens who have suffered from a lack of security and services, and the most basic requirements of life."

But many Iraqis doubt the validity of the elections, given the violent aftermath and the ongoing confrontation between the two leading lists of candidates.

"I think the elections were not fair and the results were not valid enough for the success of the electoral process in general," political analyst Ahmed al- Azzawi told IPS in Baghdad. "I think that Mr. Maliki will get a larger number of parliamentary seats when taking into consideration the appeal, and if that happens it would be easier for him to form the next government."

However, the UN, the Election Commission, and international observers have already declared the election valid.

"They're still going to take advantage of all the means at their disposal to eke out a victory," Gary A. Grappo, top political official at the United States embassy in Baghdad told reporters recently. "They're all politicians."

Minutes after the UN and Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission announced the results in Allawi's favour, Maliki went on television to attack elected members from Allawi's list. "Some of them are terrorists held in Iraqi prisons," he said.

Azzawi says Maliki's list is more "coherent" than Allawi's, and that would make it easier for the current Prime Minister to form the next government. He said an Iraqi government led by Maliki would be more in line with U.S. interests in both Iraq and the Middle East.

But many Iraqis support Allawi's list, because he is seen to be more secular and nationalist than Maliki, and somewhat less allied with U.S. interests in the country, despite his support for the U.S. through and after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

"I hope Allawi can win because he has good relations with Arab and Western countries, and he is not an agent for Iran," Yusuf Mohamed, a 60-year-old retired officer from the former Iraqi army told IPS. "Maliki has proven to be sectarian through the previous four years that he has ruled the country, that has gone from bad to worse."

Others, like a 30-year-old housewife and mother of four, who spoke with IPS on condition of anonymity, favoured Maliki because of Allawi's actions while he was interim prime minister.

"Allawi contributed to the attacks on Fallujah and Najaf, he boasted of killing many Iraqis, and he boasted that he was an intelligence agent for more than one Western country," she said.

Neither candidate has won anywhere near the 163 seats needed for majority in Parliament. In the days leading up to the announcement of results of the Mar. 7 poll, it was widely assumed that the candidate who won the most seats would be given the first attempt at forming government, within 30 days.

The PM's office then petitioned Iraq's Supreme Court to define the clause "the parliamentary bloc with the most members" in Article 76 of the Iraqi Constitution. The court ruled that the leader of the bloc with the most followers once Parliament convenes, probably in June, will be the one that forms government, rather than the candidate with the bigger showing in the elections, who was Allawi. The ruling favours Maliki.

This gives Maliki and Allawi until then to manoeuvre to win over as many candidates as they can from other alliances.

Abdu Rahman, our correspondent in Baghdad, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who reports extensively on the region.

Articles by: [Abdu Rahman](#) and
[Dahr Jamail](#)