

The Election of March 7, 2010: A Turning Point of the Iraqi Future^①

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Abstract: *The experience after the 2005 general election has left a deep lesson to the various political forces in Iraq; they realized that the country's security and stability require a coalition government of Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish representatives. The 2010 general election produced this kind of coalition government which will have the opportunity to achieve national unity and provide a positive signal to the neighbors that Iraq would not pose a threat to them, but at the same time, it faces enormous challenges. This elected government would have the historical responsibility to lead the country to sovereign independence and strive to improve the status and influence of Iraq in the region, especially after the US force is pulled out of Iraq at the end of 2011. Today, Iraq is at a historic crossroad, and if leaders can overcome the challenges and co-operate as a team, Iraq will move toward peace and stability; if they continue to be hostile to each other, Iraq will fall into chaos.*

Key Words: *Iraq Election; New Government; Sunni; Shiite, Kurdish*

The national election held in Iraq on March 7, 2010, was considered to be an important event in its political development since

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the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to the “US-Iraqi Security Agreement” which had effective implementation on January 1, 2009, the US military would withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011. The US military leaders have stressed on different occasions that the downsizing plan of the US military will be changed only if there would be a serious case of violence after the election, which has not happened so far. After the US occupation of it in 2003, Iraq faced various severe difficulties. The greatest one for the new government has been to resume its sovereignty and rebuild Iraq. After 2003, instability in Iraq has given a variety of outside forces the opportunity to impact the situation in Iraq which leads to a weak government which lost sovereignty and territorial security. So the Iraqi people have had no opportunity to fight for the motherland and national sovereignty. However, the newly elected government takes a great historical responsibility.

I. Experience of the 2005 Election

All Iraqi political forces have learned a lesson from the 2005 election which has been reflected in their attitude towards the elections in 2010. After 2003, a series of elections were held in Iraq (Katzman, 2010: April 8). The first one was on January 30, 2005 and produced an interim government. Jalal Talabani and Ibrahim al-Jaafari were the interim President and Prime Minister respectively. The elected Constitutional Council drafted a constitution on August 15, 2005 and held a referendum on October 15, 2005 (Si, 2006). The second one was held on December 15, 2005 which elected a full term (four years) government. Because the Sunnis tried to boycott the election, only Shiite and Kurdish political parties controlled this government (*Representation through Ratification, Democracy in Iraq*, 2006). Talabani continued as the President, two Vice-Presidents were the Shiite Adel

Abd al-Mahdiy and Sunni Tariq al-Hashimi and Nouri al-Maliki replaced Ibrahim Jaafari as Prime Minister.

First, Sunni parties did not participate in the election (Toensing, 2005) mostly for security reasons. Most Sunni cities had experienced the war and had been considered as dangerous areas. The second reason is that these leaders had no confidence in the political process in Iraq (Luttwak, 2005). Therefore, the 2005 election failed to eliminate the discontent of the Sunni Arabs for their status in the power structure. As a response to this election, the Sunni set off riots which had been increasing in the next two years causing the Shiite militia forces to combat them. Such intense sectarian violence, it can be attributed to the following reasons:

(1) Shiite parties in Iraq have had a close tie with Iran (Nasr, 2006), the Arab governments which supported Sunni believed that Iraq would be controlled by Iran (Gong, 2005: March). Therefore, the Sunni and those foreign governments, especially Saudi Arabia, started to use every means to fight against the new government and to prevent Iran from expanding its influence in Iraq;

(2) The military of the new government could not control the security situation and was still dependent on US military power. This made a huge gap between the Iraqi people and Iraqi security forces, because the Iraqi people did not trust the security forces that relied on US troops to keep the security and the stability inside the country;

(3) Extremist groups used those weak gaps between the Iraqi people and security forces as well as Sunni and Shiite political parties to intensify their armed activities.

One of the most important periods in Iraqi modern history was the two years after the 2005 general election, during which the whole country became the battlefield of sectarian and regional wars (Burnham, Lafta, Doocy & Roberts, 2010: September 21). However, two years later, the situation began to change as the security situation began to improve. The reasons were as follows:

(1) The ability of Iraqi military and security forces increased and started working under the indirect support of US forces (*Iraq Status Report*, 2009: March 4). The Iraqi people, especially in the controlled Sunni areas of Iraq self-organized the “Al-Sahwa” (Jasim & Salem, 2007: December 29) and fought against extremist groups. Since then, the “Al-Sahwa” members became a part of the Iraqi army and Iraqi security forces;

(2) The Iraqi government realized that if there was no Sunni support, there would be no situation under control. Therefore, the government adopted a new policy to attract Sunni political parties into the political process in Iraq;

(3) Sunni political parties maintained a certain distance from the government to prove first that the government could not control the domestic situation without their support; second was to prove that the Sunni’s participation in the political process was necessary to get the support of Arab governments; The third was to gain time to integrate the Sunni parties to develop a new strategy for the 2010 general election.

It needed real participation of the parties with different sects and ethnic backgrounds to build a stable, strong, and unified Iraq. It could not be ruled by any sect or national parties. The Shiites, Sunni and Kurdish representatives realized that they should work together to manage Iraq, strengthen national security forces, develop the national economy and quell regional powers. These were the profound lessons that the 2005 election left to the Iraqis.

II. The Opportunity of 2010 General Election

The national election on March 7, 2010 was an historic opportunity for the Iraqi people, who , with different sects and ethnic backgrounds, obtained the chance to control their own destiny and gave them a golden opportunity to work together to rebuild a unified

Iraq. The party learned these lessons from the 2005 election. Particularly, the Sunnis only had a few seats in Parliament and were weak in government power, because they did not actively participate in the 2005 general election. Therefore, all parties began to form a coalition with other political parties early to win the 2010 election.

There are several points of this election worth noting:

1. Different electoral systems: "Opening List": the mechanism in this election was different from the 2005 one.

In this election, voters could vote for candidates from any party; the coalition list or the "Opening List" showed that this election was more representative and transparent. In contrast, the 2005 elections were under the "closed list" system. The voters could only choose one candidate from a party or the coalition list. Voters did not know who was on the list, because the Electoral Commission of Iraq hid the name of the candidates for security reasons. This election mechanism paved the way for political parties which relied on family relations and alliances to gain seats.

The "opening list" system in 2010 made the election more challenging and highly competitive, as the common challenge that all political organizations faced was to get the support of the Iraqi people. In addition, the system also tested the ability of the Iraqi people whether they could choose strong leaders who would lead the country to conduct the reconstruction and establish good foreign relations, especially with neighboring countries.

2. Participants

In this election, more than 6000 candidates from 297 political organizations competed for 325 National Assembly seats (*High Electoral Commission of Iraq*). In the meantime, political organizations with common political programs, common interests which represent the same religious sects or ethnic groups tried to form a unified camp to prevent spreading the votes and to obtain as many seats as possible in the Parliament. There were competitions in the following four camps:

(1) The State of Law Coalition, including the Dawa party (Shanahan, 2004), "Anbar Salvation Front" and some other smaller parties.

(2) The National Iraqi Alliance led by Ammar Hakim. The main members were the Shiites, including the Hakim-led "Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq," "Iraqi National Congress," "Ahmed Chalabi," the "Badr Organisation," the "Sadrist," the former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari branch of the Da'wa Party, the "Islamic Virtue Party," and the "Shiia Turkmen Movement" among others.

(3) Iyad Allawi-led the "Iraqi National Movement, al-Iraqiyya" or the "Iraqiyya List," including Iyad Allawi's "Iraqi National Accord," the "Iraqi Front for National Dialogue," and other smaller Sunni parties.

(4) The Kurdish parties, including Jalal Talabani's (Shanahan, 2004) "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan" and Massoud Barzani's "Kurdistan Democratic Party."

Behind these camps, there were regional powers to support, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia (Hamood, 2010: January). The State of Law Coalition and National Iraqi Alliance, on behalf of the majority Shiites and a small part of Sunnis had common political interests with Iran, especially the Ammar Hakim-led "National Iraqi Alliance." Therefore, Iran provided a variety of support

Saudi Arabia supported the "Iraqiyya List" which represented the majority Sunni and some secular Shiite political parties. They had common political interests with the Arab governments and were strongly opposed to Iran.

In contrast, the Kurdish camp was trying to use the above competition to get as much power as possible and gave local governments a lot of power in its sphere of influence (Kurdistan). They are ready to ally with any political camp that pledged their interests, especially in Kirkok (Wang, 2005: May).

3. Result of General Election

In the general election on March 7, 2010, there was no political group having a majority of seats in the new Parliament out of 325 seats. The result of the elections was that former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's "Iraqiyya List" obtained an initial victory, who received 91 National Assembly seats. The following one was the Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki-led "the State of Law Coalition," getting a total of 89 seats.

The "National Iraqi Alliance" received 70 seats; the "Kurdistan Alliance" received 43 and a few other small parties won 32 seats (*High Electoral Commission of Iraq*). For various reasons, the election result was delayed to announce. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki proposed to recalculate the vote in Baghdad (Myers, 2010: April 19), which caused the delay of two weeks. Nouri al-Maliki hoped to reduce the seats of Allawi's camp, but the result was not much changed (Sly & Salman, 2010: May 15).

In addition, the Election Commission had to investigate whether the candidates had been related with Saddam Hussein which further delayed the announcement of election results. Some candidates therefore were deprived of their eligibility (Shadid, 2010: May 11). After the announcement of the result, Iraq's Electoral Commission passed them to the Supreme Court to certify and finally cleared the main obstacles of forming a new government. The Supreme Court signed the election results on June 1, 2010 which paved the way for the first meeting of the new Congress on June 14, 2010 (Jakes & Schreck, 2010). The meeting would continue until the major political camps reached consensus to form a new government (*The First Meeting of Iraq's New Parliament is Fruitless*, 2010: June 14)

No matter how this election turned out or how widely votes were spread, the election itself was generally successful. After all the major political forces were actively involved; this brought the opportunity for Iraq's future political development.

III. Difficult Process of Forming a New Government

The most important and sensitive task after the election was to form a new government. For any political camp, there were two must-go-through steps in order to form the cabinet successfully: the first one was to get more parliamentary seats than any other camps; the second was that the nominated new cabinet must get more than half of parliamentary votes (more than 163 votes.) According to the preliminary results of the national elections, Iyad Allawi's "Iraqiyya List" with 91 seats had more seats than other political blocs in the new Iraqi National Assembly.

However, al-Maliki and other Shiite parties were against the "Iraqiyya List" to form a new cabinet. They began to form a new coalition and wanted to recapture the right of forming the new government. According to regulations, the largest camp would have the right to form a new government, but it was controversial for "the largest camp" interpretation. Article 76 of the Iraqi Constitution claimed that "the President of the Republic authorizes the largest camp in the National Assembly to form cabinet." In this regard, the "Iraqiyya List" insisted that "the largest camp" refers to the one which has the largest number of parliamentary seats, which was based on the precedent of the 2005 general elections. The Iraqi Chief Justice Medhat made a decision on March 26, 2010 that "the largest camp" was to be formed after the election, which would be the one that shared the most parliamentary seats in all political camps (*Supreme Court: Parliamentary calls for the largest camp form a new government*, 2010: March 26). Thus, the representatives of the "State of Law Coalition" and the "Iraqi National Alliance" announced on May 5, 2010 their intention to form a coalition, so this new camp held 159 seats in Parliament and became the largest camp. According to Medhat's decision, the new camp conformed to the description of "the largest camp" in the Constitution.

The main purpose of the coalition was to challenge Iyad Allawi's

"Iraqiyya List" and get the right of naming the Prime Minister. The "Iraqiyya List" denied the legitimacy of the coalition. Its senior member Osama al-Nujaifi said: "We believe that their declaration is lack of legal norms, which is only a media means. It is illegal." (Abdul-zahra, 2010: June 14). At the same time, the Kurdish group responded positively to the coalition (*Al-Iraqiyya List warns of "sectarian alignments"*, 2010: May 6) and expressed that if the new coalition could resolve its internal problems and nominated one of them as the Prime Minister, they were also willing to join the alliance.

At the beginning, the new alliance faced many difficulties to nominate a candidate to take the position of Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki nominated himself, but he could not get the support of some members of the new coalition (*Sadrists do not want Maliki to remain in office*, 2010: May 16). But this situation changed when the main political blocs agreed on power sharing.

The disputes about the nomination of the Prime Minister gave the opportunity to the "Iraqiyya List" which tried to make a coalition with some new members of the Shiite alliance in private, so that on one hand, the new Shiite alliance would spread and weaken; on the other hand, they could win enough seats to form a new government. On July 20, 2010, Allawi met the member of Shi'ite Alliance, Moqtada al-Sadr in Damascus and discussed how to form a new government. Allawi said: "We have reached a high degree of consensus in many areas." (*Under the Charge of Syria, Allawi Met with Al-Sadr in Damascus*, 2010: July 20). He also tried to do the same thing with other members of the Shiite alliance (*Allawi Met with Al- Maliki*), but without success.

This fight lasted more than eight months. In this marathon negotiation, those political camps in Iraq were trying to narrow the distance with each other. And finally, the Barzani proposal got consensus. Through several months of negotiations, all forces reached a consensus on November 11, 2010 to form a new government. All political camps became members of the new government to share

rights. Under the new agreement, Jalal Talabani (Kurdish) was re-elected as President, al-Maliki (Shiite) was re-elected as the new Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi (a secular Shiite) agreed to lead the new Security Committee and Osama al-Nujaifi (Sunni) became Speaker of the House. On December 21, 2010, the Iraqi Parliament voted to pass Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's cabinet list (*The Iraq Parliament Passed the Maliki New Government List, 2010: December 20,*) and had the result that three Deputy Prime Ministers and other cabinet ministers except the security ministers (29 ministers were from the Shiite, Sunni, Kurds and others). During the vote Maliki has vowed to nominate the ministers of the security issues (Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of defense) within weeks, but that did not happen because of differences among the political blocks on some of the nominations (*Kurds refused the candidate nominated by the Iraqiyya List , 2011: March*). Maliki himself took the responsibility of these ministries until the political blocks make consensus on the nominations of these ministers.

Iraq's new government announced that the establishment of such a coalition government would have the opportunity to lead the people to rebuild the country and face the real challenges.

(1) Opportunity for a coalition government

The coalition government represents all ethnic and sectarian interests, which is very necessary for this sensitive moment in Iraq's history. First, this coalition will help promote national unity. The coalition government will strengthen the cohesion of the Iraqi people and promote the ethnic and sectarian harmony, especially between the Shiite and Sunni. Second, the coalition government will be a balance of power. The representatives of the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish parties will maintain the balance of power and it will be seen for a coalition government; again, a balanced government will send a positive message to its neighbors that the new government will not be controlled by some region and keeps an equal distance with all

neighbors; finally, a comprehensive government will strengthen the relationship between itself and the Iraqi people, especially with the Iraqi security forces. It will have a positive impact on the security and stability in Iraq.

(2) Challenges of the coalition government

Currently, there are two major challenges of the coalition government: First, the new government needs all its members to collaborate with each other and work as a team. In other words, the members of the new coalition government must work for the national interest rather than their own party's interests. In addition, they have to collaborate with each other to prevent the disputes among the various political camps interfering in the work of the coalition government. Especially, the dispute between "the State of Law Coalition" and "Iraqiyya List," since before the new government formed, Maliki and Allawi accused each other on different occasions (*Allawi accused Maliki of dictatorial powers which led to more acute ethnic conflict in Iraq, 2010: June 11*) that was obvious during their meeting on June 12, 2010 (*Allawi and Maliki finished their meeting suddenly, 2010: June*). Even after the forming of the new government the relation between two sides didn't improve, when Allawi refused to lead the new Security Committee, and complained that Maliki and some political leaders denied the obligations of the Barzani proposal (*Can Allawi, topple Maliki's government? 2011: March*).

The second one is the external powers and their relationship with Iraqi parties, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia. As many know, Iran is behind the Iraqi Shiite political party, while Saudi Arabia is a supporter of the Sunni parties (Hamood, 2010: January). If the two countries imposed their disputes on the negotiations of the Sunni and Shiite parties, it would be a great threat to Iraq's political process. Thus, political parties in Iraq must represent the regional interests rather than the interests of the Iraqi people, and then they will become tools in the hand of the regional powers to achieve their political goals

in Iraq and in the region. Currently, the wave of the political transformation in the Middle East made the governments of the neighboring countries focus on the internal affairs, trying to narrow the gap between the governments and their people, for example, Saudi Arabia has adopted a new policy and spent big amount of money to prevent the impact of this wave and gain public support for government (*Saudi Arabia: Reforms with \$ 37 billion*, 2011: March). The new Iraqi government can use this time to strength the national unity and build strategy to prevent the intervention of the regional powers.

IV. The Danger of the US Withdrawal

Under this slow process of forming the new government, the withdrawal plan of the US military will affect Iraqi security and stability. According to the “Iraqi Security Agreement” signed by the Bush administration in 2008, the US combat troops were to be withdrawn by the end of August 2010 and all US forces must leave Iraq by the end of 2011. Compared with the peak of 170 thousands troops after the surge plan Bush that made in 2007 to help stabilize the country, there have still been 50 thousand US forces after September 1, 2010 in Iraq. The US military forces remaining in Iraq are to help train Iraqi forces involved in the process of counter-terrorism and protect Americans in Iraq. In addition, the US military and administration officials said that if the situation was serious, they would start having only the non-combat troops. At the end of the withdrawal plan, more than 350 bases and 3.5 million equipments will be shut down and transferred to Iraqi security forces or to other US forces (*Obama confirms plan for US troop withdrawal from Iraq*, 2010: August 11).

The US decision to withdraw its troops is more out of the US interests rather than the current difficult situation in Iraq. Iraq has a political vacuum when the Iraqi leader failed to set up a new

government and the army was not yet fully available. A rebellion could be imminent. Therefore, the withdrawal of US forces must be done after the new government was formed in order to make it take the necessary responsibility. However, the United States has accelerated the withdrawal process for two reasons. The first concerned its domestic situation that the US Democratic Party worried they would lose votes in the mid-term elections in November. In fact, the Party had major election losses in the House of Representatives, gubernatorial elections, and in the state legislative bodies. At the same time, it is related with the very serious American economic slowdown. The second is the preference of US foreign policy. Iraq is no longer the primary concern of the US as the leaders turn their attention to Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries.

Iraqi political and military leaders have not had the same response to the withdrawal plan: the political leaders declared that the Iraqi army was ready to take responsibility of the independence and no longer needed the support of the US military to maintain security and stability; Iraqi military leaders, however, claimed that the Iraqi forces were not ready, arguing that they needed time and the help of the US military. Despite this, the Iraqi Prime Minister said: "The US war in Iraq marks that Iraq regained its independence on an equal basis with the United States I promise that the Iraqi security forces have the ability and capacity to take up the mission (*The withdrawal of the US: Iraq Respond Calm and Maliki Expressed: The Sectarianism will Never Come Back*, 2010: September 1).

But the top leaders of the Iraqi military still criticized the US withdrawal plan by the end of 2011. Babaker Zebari, Iraq's top military leader warned that "Iraq troops cannot control the domestic situation before 2020" (*Are the Iraqi Army Ready to Control the Security Situation?* 2010: August 15).

The Iraqi army may not ensure national security before 2020. The US military should be allowed to stay in Iraq. Iraqi Defense Minister

Abdel Qader Jassim has repeatedly warned of a premature retreat of the US military, "Our biggest challenge of security is the transition from the United States forces to Iraqi forces. We cannot say that the Iraqi army has been built into a modern army." (Abbas, 2010: February). The different attitudes of political and military leaders to the US withdrawal plan not only indicated the huge gap between the two parties, but also have shown that politicians' assessment of the situation in Iraq is based on their own political interests, rather than practical situation.

On various occasions, US leaders announced that if the violent events threatened Iraq's national security, the US military would roll back. However, it is not the proper way to resolve the Iraq problem. Iraqis should not rely on foreign forces to control the situation. Without people's support and depending on military force alone, Iraq can not obtain its national security. The security and stability of Iraq require a strong, popularly-supported government which guides the army to control its territory. Moreover, establishing a coalition government with the background of different sects and ethnic groups may be a wise idea.

V. The Impact of the Election on the Regional Forces

The 2010 election determines the stability of Iraq, which causes great anxiety in neighboring countries. They have measured the impact of regional forces in Iraq and show their political influence in the region (Luttwak, 2005). After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 decision-makers of those areas believe that a stable Iraqi government without any sectarian and ethnic strife is in their best interests. "The division of Iraq means that the existing strategic balance in the Middle East is broken, which will lead to Gulf insecurity, sectarian conflict, the independence of the Kurds, refugees and many other issues. Therefore, the relevant governments have publicly expressed support

for the unity and independence of Iraq.” (Wei & Li, 2009). Countries with sharp ethnic problems such as Iran, Syria and Turkey will naturally feel afraid of certain election results which might cause ethnic disputes and a civil war, particularly leading to an independent Kurdish country, and it would be a direct threat to the three countries.

For Saudi Arabia, the 2010 Iraq election results may give rise to sectarian conflicts. Although the Shiites are the minority in the Saudi Arabian population, they are the majority in the eastern oil province of Hasa, which caused great anxiety in Riyadh. The reason is very simple: the backyard of Saudi Arabia is this fragmented Iraq which will threaten its national interests. Saudi Arabia does not want Iran, which is a Sunni challenge to its regional Shiite forces, to re-emerge as a regional threat after the 2003 US/UK invasion of Iraq.

All neighbors are putting their efforts to weaken the relationship between the US and Iraq, and at the same time, consolidate their special relationship with Iraq. Those neighbors believe that the so-called good election result was to form a unified Iraq, but a too powerful Iraq equipped with US military forces would also be regarded as a threat to this region. Although today's Iraq is far from the “combative” one under Saddam Hussein, Iraq's invasion of Iran and Kuwait are also memorable and fearful to those neighboring countries.

At the 2007 International Islamic Joint Meeting, although Iran and Saudi Arabia promised not to use the division between the Sunni and Shiites (as a political tool), and pledged to reduce the sectarian conflict, the suspicion and the tense situation between two countries still continued. Saudi Arabia is opposed to any pro-Tehran acts. In the previous government, Saudi Arabia's attitude toward Iraq was the best example of it as Saudi Arabia refused to establish an embassy in Baghdad when Iraq was under the control of the Shiite government which had a close relationship with Iran. The fact is that the two countries will continue to influence the situation in Iraq in order to

gain their interests in Iraq and in the region.

Conclusion

The Iraqi people experienced a series of elections after 2003; particularly within 2005 there were two general elections. The first was in January. The elected Parliament drafted a constitution; the next one was in December when an integrated government was elected. Since the Sunnis did not participate actively, this election produced an unbalanced government. Since then, especially in 2009, the Sunni led several insurgencies against the new government. This elected government was very weak and dependent on the US to control the internal security situation. It also failed to win support from Arab countries, as they believed that this government would cause Iraq to follow the Iran way and would break from the Arab world. The above situation has changed after the general election on March 7, 2010. All parties with different political backgrounds have been deeply involved in the elections, especially the active participation of the Sunni parties.

The result has been the initial victory of the "Iraqiyya List." According to the Iraqi constitution, since it has won more parliamentary seats than others, it has the right to form a new government. But the nominated cabinet needed more than half of the votes in Parliament (that is more than 163 votes out of 325) in order to form a government. The representatives of the Shiite parties, the "State of Law Coalition" and the "Iraqi National Alliance" formed a new coalition after the election in order to stop the "Iraqiyya List." They held more votes. They tried to take the right of forming a cabinet and absorbed the support of other parties and competed for half of the votes for the cabinet. After long negotiations, the new one nominated Nouri al-Maliki as the Prime Minister and formed a new coalition government including Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. According to the

proposal of every party, Jalal Talabani was re-elected as President, Allawi would lead a new Security Committee and Osama al-Nujaifi was elected Speaker of the House. The National Assembly passed the new cabinet on December 21, 2010.

Overall, the 2010 election was an important turning point in the history of Iraq. The elected coalition government represents the interests of all ethnic and sectarian parties. The Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish representatives are all members of this new government, which laid a multi-faction coalition structure. Such a government could lead the country toward the right direction, but only if the new government members fully cooperate with each other and resist the intervention of external and regional powers.

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The Election of March 7, 2010: A Turning Point of the Iraqi Future

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