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Iraq's election

The wrangling has only just begun

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A government reflecting the people's will should slowly and messily emerge



The purposeful purple patch

DOZENS of explosions woke up voters in Baghdad on March 7th, heralding the day of the general election. Every few minutes another thunderous bang reminded them to stay at home, away from polling stations. Officials said the city had been hit by a barrage of mortars. Voter turnout was lower than before, in Baghdad little more than 50%. It was hardly a shining model of democracy.

The American army played down the violence. Most of the bangs, said its spokesman, had been caused by water bottles stuffed with explosives. Insurgents had put them in bins around the city and set them off by mobile phones to terrify voters. Two big bombs had killed at least 38 people but nobody was badly hurt by the bottle-bombs, said General Ray Odierno, the American commander. The bangs were an act of desperation by a fading insurgency. The turnout overall was said to be 62%. Despite the fear, many Iraqis were plainly determined to

assert their democratic right to choose their leaders. Barack Obama called the election a "milestone in Iraqi history".

Producing a new government is another matter. Months of haggling between the plethora of electoral fronts is likely to ensue. The State of Law alliance, a predominantly Shia group led by the prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, is said to have done well, as is the more secular and cross-sectarian Iraqi National Movement led by a predecessor of Mr Maliki, Iyad Allawi, another Shia. Both men said they had won, without solid evidence to support their claims. The final result will not be announced for at least a month.

Only then will parliament meet and start to form a government. First it will elect a speaker, by recent tradition a Sunni Arab. Next, according to the constitution, it must choose a president, possibly a Kurd, as before. By midsummer, the new members of parliament may set down what they call "the road to 163". That is the number of MPs needed for a majority in the legislative chamber. No party or electoral alliance will have come close to that figure on its own. Yet even if Messrs Maliki or Allawi each get as few as 70 seats out of the 325 on offer, they could still be front-runners to form a government. The new parliament will be as fragmented as the old one. Coalition-building is what counts. Iraqi politicians will have to do what they find hardest: accommodate each other.

They have a range of choices. The path to power is foggy. Mr Maliki could team up with a Kurdish block, though that still would not give him a majority. He could try to win over parts of the Iraqi National Alliance, a predominantly Shia Islamist lot which includes several old allies with whom he has quarrelled. Perhaps instead he could woo members of Mr Allawi's more secular alliance. Mr Maliki's big advantage is that he will remain prime minister as the wrangling drags on, thereby still controlling the government and having a better chance of shaping events.

Mr Allawi's task may be trickier. If he links up with the Kurds, his northern Sunni Arab allies could angrily desert him, since they are at daggers drawn with the Kurds in and around Mosul, northern Iraq's biggest city. If Mr Allawi beds down with some of the Shias of the Iraqi National Alliance, his Sunni allies in Baghdad and Anbar province, two of his power bases, might dump him. Mr Allawi's non-sectarian approach in the election could yet harm him when it comes to making wider alliances.

Clusters of smaller parties could hold the balance. But the Kurdish block, often touted as the kingmaker, looks weaker than it was, because a new Kurdish opposition group, Goran (Change), has gained ground and may split the Kurdish vote in parliament, thereby undermining the old guard's ability to call the shots.

The Iraqi National Alliance, the most fiercely Shia group, is also in flux. The wing that supports Muqtada al-Sadr, a populist cleric, has gained influence at the expense of the more pragmatic Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which owes allegiance to the Hakim family and is close to Iran. Many former ISCI voters seem to have stayed at home, especially in the south, where the group used to prevail. Unless it is woven into the ruling establishment, the militia loyal to Mr Sadr could end up running a statelet within a state, similar to Hizbullah, the Shia party-cum-militia that dominates southern Lebanon.

The courts could play a big part in coalition-building. Complaints of fraud are piling up. Mr Allawi says the National Alliance tried to remove some of his allies from the ballot the night before the poll. And he has accused Mr Maliki's people of intimidating voters. In return, Mr Maliki may sue for defamation. Meanwhile, Arabs in the north are casting doubt on Kurdish voter rolls. It could get nasty.

The Americans and the Iranians will both try to promote favoured candidates. Messrs Maliki and Allawi would be acceptable to both their governments. "We'll be close to the process," says America's ambassador, Chris Hill. Whoever emerges in charge, the election result is likely to reflect the Iraqi people's will. And that should enable the Americans steadily to go home.