

The
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Iraq's flagging democracy

Stop messing around

Iraqis and their neighbours need to get a grip—or their country could slip back to its bad old ways

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FEW countries more urgently need governing, yet Iraq is languishing without a real leader. No party or alliance clearly won the election held three months ago, so a period of horse-trading was inevitable. But now the country is dangerously adrift. The new parliament has only just assembled for the first time. No laws have been passed since March. Vital legislation to bring in foreign investment and share out the proceeds of oil production is stalled. Above all, Iraq needs a leader who can appeal to its Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds, divided by a chasm of ethno-sectarian hatred. If not, it risks falling back into the sort of authoritarianism that was supposed to have been banished by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The chief rivals for the post of prime minister are Iyad Allawi, whose alliance won the most seats in parliament but still got barely more than a quarter of them, and Nuri al-Maliki, the caretaking incumbent. Both Mr Allawi, pictured left, and Mr Maliki, pictured right, are Shias, as are well over half of Iraq's people. But they seem incapable of doing the job (see [article](#)). Mr Maliki at one time raised hopes that he could, especially after he boldly dispatched the national army to the southern city of Basra to chase out thuggish Shia militias. But since then he has fallen back on a core of assertive Shias and is widely reviled by Sunnis and Kurds. He is not the unifier Iraq needs. For his country's sake, he should give way to another man.

Mr Allawi, a secular Shia who long ago left Saddam Hussein's Baath party, was a plausible prime minister from 2004-05 under American tutelage, but he let corruption get wildly out of

hand. More recently, he has appealed to the Sunni minority, which voted for him in large numbers. As the winner of most parliamentary seats, Mr Allawi looks better suited to lead the country. But the Shia majority revile him as a Baathist. If he cannot persuade enough MPs to endorse him, he too should give up his quest to be prime minister.

The best course for Iraq would then be for a compromise candidate to be chosen as soon as possible. The Shias would be foolish not to give Mr Allawi and his Sunni supporters a clutch of decent jobs. And that means a coalition government with a shared vision, not just the familiar carve-up into ministerial fiefs corruptly dished out on a tribal, sectarian or ethnic basis, with militias lurking murderously in the background.

Outsiders can help, by creating a permanent "contact group" of neighbours, perhaps overseen by the UN, to set a monitoring and negotiating framework, much as Europe's bigger powers, assisted by the United States, stabilised the Balkans in the 1990s. American influence in Iraq is dwindling but still matters. The UN has made progress towards calming nerves along the territorial "trigger line" dividing Arabs from Kurds. The Turks have been more sympathetic to Iraq's Kurds. But the Syrians, if they want to play a bigger regional role, must do more to discourage the insurgency. The Iranians should stop egging on their fellow Shias to humiliate the Sunnis. And the Saudis should accept that Iraq, their beefiest neighbour, is bound to be dominated by Shias. A democratic election has been held in Iraq, the violence is down and the Americans look set to leave by the end of next year. But that must not be the end of the story. Too much blood has been spilt, Iraqi and American, for there to be a washing of hands.

Saddamned if they don't

In the end, though, it is for the Iraqis to rebuild their country. Their elected politicians face a choice: to compromise over power in a democratic country or to block each other and let sectarian bigotry, corruption and intolerance prevail. Surely they can remember where that path leads.

Leaders