INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

IRAQ'S SECULAR OPPOSITION:
THE RISE AND DECLINE OF AL-IRAQIYA
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A key player in the political crisis currently unfolding in Baghdad is the Al-Iraqiya Alliance, a cross-confessional, predominantly Sunni, mostly secular coalition of parties that came together almost three years ago in an effort to replace Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the March 2010 elections. It failed then, and its flailing efforts now, along with those of other parties, to unseat Maliki through a parliamentary no-confidence vote highlight Iraqiya's waning power as a force that could limit the prime minister's authority. They also show that what remains of the country's secular middle class lacks an influential standard bearer to protect its interests and project a middle ground in the face of ongoing sectarian tensions that Syria's civil war risks escalating. Finally, they underline the marginalisation of Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkomans by the Shiite-led government, further increasing the potential for violence.

It did not have to be this way. As recently as two years ago, when election results became known, Iraqiya showed promise as a secular alternative in an environment defined by ethno-sectarian politics. It was the only political alliance to attract both Shiite and especially Sunni voters. It campaigned on an expressly non-sectarian platform (arguing, for example, against the notion of federal Sunni and Shiite regions) as the representative of liberals and moderates. It won the largest number of seats, 91, against the 89 mustered by its main rival, Maliki's State of Law list. Alone among major political alliances, Iraqiya claimed support throughout the country, having obtained twelve of its seats in Shiite-majority areas, when Maliki's did not win a single one in predominantly Sunni governorates.

But Iraqiya overreached. In negotiations over government formation, its leader, Iyad Allawi, insisted on holding the prime minister's position by virtue of heading the winning list. In response, Shiite parties that had fallen out with Maliki grew fearful that former Baathists would return to power and once again coalesced around him. Joining forces with Maliki, they managed to form the largest parliamentary bloc; the outgoing prime minister, who also

gained support from both Iran and the U.S., held on to his position. In a striking reversal of fortune, Iraqiya lost its leverage. Some of its leaders rushed to accept senior positions in the new Maliki government even before other key planks of the power-sharing accord between Maliki, Allawi and Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish region, known as the Erbil agreement, could be implemented. The goal of the Erbil accord had been to limit the powers of the prime minister. It was not to be. Since taking office in December 2010, Maliki steadily has built up his power, making no concessions to his governing partners. He has retained control over the interior and defence ministries as well as of elite military brigades. As a result, Iraqiya has found itself marginalised in government, its leaders and members exposed to intimidation and arrest by security forces, often under the banner of de-Baathification and anti-terrorism. Having campaigned partially on the promise it would bring such practices to an end, Iraqiya proved itself powerless in the eyes of its supporters. Matters came close to breaking point in December 2011, as the last U.S. troops left the country, when Maliki's government issued an arrest warrant against Vice President Tareq al-Hashimi, a senior Sunni leader, while declaring Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, another Sunni leader – both of them from Iraqiya – persona non grata for having referred to Maliki as a "dictator".

In April 2012, tensions between Maliki and his governing partners escalated further. Joining forces, Iraqiya leaders, Barzani and other Kurdish leaders as well as some of Maliki's Shiite rivals such as the powerful Sadrist movement, accused the prime minister of violating the Erbil agreement and amassing power by undemocratic and unconstitutional means. Their efforts ever since to hold a parliamentary no-confidence vote against Maliki have been hampered by internal divisions. The crisis is at a stalemate: Maliki hangs on to power, even enjoying a surge in popularity in Shiite areas; his rivals lack a viable strategy to unseat him until the next parliamentary elections, which should take place in 2014. This, they fear, leaves plenty of time for the prime minister to further consolidate his hold over the security forces and carry out further repression to achieve the kind of parliamentary majority in the next elections that has eluded him so far.

Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiya

An emboldened prime minister, growing sectarian tensions and a deeply mistrustful opposition are a recipe for violent conflict, especially in light of troubling developments in neighbouring Syria. Iraqis across the divide express fears that a spiralling sectarian-tinged civil war in their neighbour could exacerbate tensions at home and usher the country into another round of sectarian conflict. In a separate report, Crisis Group has proposed some ways to mitigate the chances of such a scenario.

A key to understanding the political battle in Baghdad is to appreciate the extent to which it was avoidable. A series of ill-conceived steps has contributed to Iraqiya's decline as a non-sectarian alliance bringing in a significant and otherwise underrepresented segment of the population. If the group hopes to survive the current phase and truly represent its constituency's interests, it will have to engage in a serious internal reflection, in which it honestly assesses the strategies it has pursued, draws appropriate lessons and paves the way toward more democratic internal decision-making. If Iraqiya is to play a role in solving the dangerous political crisis, it first will have to overcome the crisis within that, over the past two years, has steadily been eroding its credibility.

As part of a new strategy it could:

develop a more formal internal decision-making process that would allow for dissenting views to be communicated openly and directly to senior leadership;

engage in a deliberate debate with its constituents on what they expect from the government and Iraqiya's role in it, and whether they consider that the alliance has contributed to meeting those expectations. This could be done by requiring its parliament members to regularly return to their constituencies to engage with voters through organised forums, or by encouraging its provincial representatives to maintain steady ties with universities and professional associations so as to allow constituents to provide feedback on Iraqiya's performance;

develop and publish a strategy document that would review in detail and objectively developments since March 2010, including its own performance, and that

of its individual ministers and senior leaders, with recommendations on how it could improve;

review its relationship with other political alliances, including State of Law, the National Alliance and the Kurdistani Alliance, with a view to resolving differences and contributing to improving the state's performance;

negotiate a countrywide political compromise with its counterparts, in which it would offer to abandon efforts by some of its members to establish federal regions in exchange for a more equitable security and human rights policy (including prohibiting arrests without just cause, ensuring that all detainees have access to adequate legal representation within 24 hours of their arrest, and allowing them to contact their relatives immediately upon their arrest) and more meaningful decentralisation (allowing governorates greater control over local investment and discrete issues such as education and transport).

Baghdad/Brussels, 31 July

For the full report:

http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/127-iraqs-secular-opposition-the-rise-and-decline-of-al-iraqiya