IRAQI PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS: WHAT TEHRAN HAS LOST

The Iraqi provincial elections have been largely interpreted as a serious blow to Iran. While it signals a major defeat for Iran’s hardliners, it is actually a significant strategic victory for its pragmatists.

The resounding defeat of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Iran’s strongest ally in Baghdad and a leading pro-Khomeinist Shia party in Iraq, upset many hardliners in Tehran. ISCI has been one of the strongest of the ruling parties in post-Baathist Iraq and the hardliners’ biggest ally in Baghdad. It was formed in 1982 by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran and has historically been a key supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamist ideology of velayat-e faqih in Shia politics. Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, ISCI party leader Abdul Aziz Hakim has been a key player in Iraqi politics, even acting as an intermediary between Tehran and Washington at times amid the decline of security in the post-war period.

However, with the rise of sectarian clashes in 2006, ISIC lost considerable support due to accusations of corruption, incompetence and promoting sectarian conflict. The party’s close ties with Tehran have also hurt its reputation in recent years as the Iraqi sense of nationalism has strengthened. Following defeat in seven of the southern regions it had won in the 2005 elections, ISCI, the party famous for its vision of a Shia federated region in the south, is now one of the weakest factions on the Iraqi political map.

This is good news for Iranian pragmatists. ISCI’s defeat signals the rise of a more centralized Iraqi government. In the view of Iranian pragmatists, a stronger Baghdad would increase regional stability and ultimately improve security in the
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Iranian provinces bordering Iraq, where separatist movements still pose a major threat to Iran’s internal stability. Many pragmatists, like Ali Larijani and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahrudi, see the empowerment of Maliki and the subsequent decline of militias as a way for Iraq to increase its autonomy and force an early withdrawal of American forces. Other pragmatic conservatives like Hashemi Rafsanjani support Maliki because improved security provides greater economic opportunities.

In contrast, ideological hardliners, including the upper-echelon of the IRGC and the Basij Corps, namely Mohammad Ali Jafari and Mohammad Hejazi, hoped for an ISCI victory in order to maintain their influence in Baghdad. But the news of the electoral results came as a big surprise. On February 5, when Iraq’s Independent High Electoral Commission announced the initial electoral results, the hardline state-run Iranian newspapers kept a low-key position on the outcome. In some newspapers, the electoral results were even described as a major “victory” for ISIC, while the decline of Shia voter participation, especially in the province of Diyala, was primarily blamed on the lack of security due to the Sunni insurgency. The pragmatic conservative and reformist newspapers, however, hailed Maliki’s victory as a “triumph” for Iraq and a defeat of the (unnamed) Iraqi factions that seek to spread discord in the country.

As Iraqis prepare for their second general elections in late 2009, Tehran still remains divided on a coherent strategic policy toward Iraq. Ideological hardliners hope to see a stable Iraq that is nevertheless weakened by sectarian politics. Meanwhile, pragmatic conservatives and reformists seek a more centralized govern-

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