

Maliki keeps foes, friends guessing

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Unilateral and Aggressive Measures Aimed at More Support for Reelection

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BAGHDAD -- With a raid this week on a camp of Iranian dissidents once sheltered by the United States, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has again demonstrated a knack for surprising both foes and allies in his attempt to emerge as the victor in crucial parliamentary elections in January.

So far, he has ordered attacks on militiamen in Basra against the advice of the U.S. military, turned the June 30 deadline for U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraqi cities into an orchestrated celebration of Iraqi independence and rigorously tried to conceal the U.S. presence that remains, fearful that Iraqis will see the withdrawal as a charade.

Maliki's government had for months contemplated a move against the Iranian exiles, who are members of a group called the Mujaheddin-e Khalq, promising the U.S. government that it would treat the more than 3,000 camp residents humanely and not force any of them to return to Iran. But the raid Tuesday caught U.S. military officials, diplomats and even some Iraqi officers by surprise. Iran, which has called for action against the group, lauded the operation.

Taken together, the moves demonstrate an eagerness on Maliki's part to do what was unthinkable when he took office three years ago -- create an image of himself as an independent leader in a country that still hosts 130,000 U.S. troops. But his penchant for unilateral action, often backed with the force of arms, has created enemies across the spectrum, many of them determined to block his reelection.

"He wants to turn himself into a national symbol, and he is willing to use power and force to promote himself as one," said Salim Abdullah, a Sunni lawmaker and part of a bloc in parliament that has opposed Maliki in the past. "He is determined to break through anything that can get in the way of him becoming prime minister again."

Challenges Loom Large

Maliki faces an array of challenges as he heads toward elections in January that will choose a parliament and eventually lead to a new cabinet and prime minister. Few expect him to continue to enjoy the remarkable convergence of luck and fortune that has helped transform him from a compromise choice as prime minister, whose weakness made him appealing to more powerful forces, into the axis today around which Iraqi politics have begun to revolve.

Violence remains a feature of the landscape here, threatening to undo what Maliki, fairly or unfairly, has touted as his greatest accomplishment: a restoration of a semblance of calm in Baghdad and other war-wrecked towns and cities.

On Friday, car bombings near five Shiite mosques in Baghdad killed at least 29 people, underscoring insurgents' continued ability to strike at the heart of the fortified capital.

Perhaps even more challenging to Maliki are the frenetic negotiations that have become a parlor game in Baghdad. Followers of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, blamed for some of the worst sectarian bloodletting, have ventured to Anbar province, once the cradle of the Sunni insurgency. A procession of politicians -- Kurd and Arab, secular and religious -- has visited Abdel-Aziz Hakim, a Shiite leader stricken with cancer, at his hospital room in Tehran. He remains lucid, though he often converses with guests while receiving oxygen, visitors say.

Politicians say Ibrahim al-Jafari, a former prime minister, has coined a phrase for the talks: "There are no guarantees for anyone, and there are no exclusions for anyone."

Since the spring, Maliki has courted Sunni leaders, including Saleh al-Mutlak, who counts former Baathists among his constituency, and Ahmed Abu Risha, probably the most powerful tribal sheik in Anbar. Abu Risha has declared his intention to ally with Maliki.

"If he considers you a friend, he keeps you as a friend," Abu Risha said.

"We are determined not to return to sectarianism because it's the root of all our problems," the prime minister said in an interview with The Washington Post.

Critics accuse Maliki of courting those Sunni politicians to put pressure on his Shiite colleagues in negotiations to reconstitute the pan-Shiite alliance that competed in elections in 2005. This time, Maliki would have the upper hand in the bloc, and he has sought promises that he would enjoy the coalition's backing to become prime minister again.

He has yet to win that pledge. And Shiite politicians, wary of what they see as Maliki's authoritarian streak, have demanded more transparency in a government dominated by a circle of advisers from his Dawa party -- in particular Tarek Nijm Abdullah, who directs the office of the prime minister. If Maliki becomes prime minister again, the politicians have vowed to retain a say in cabinet appointments, reserve the right to review his policies and curb attempts to concentrate control of the military in his hands.

Still, as one politician noted, "promises before the election aren't worth much."

Others insist that Maliki has simply earned too many enemies to become prime minister again, however well he does in the elections. This week, Sunni leaders criticized Maliki's raid on the camp of Iranian dissidents, suggesting that he was doing the bidding of neighboring Iran. Some Kurdish officials say they will never support his return -- as have followers of Sadr and a leading Sunni party. But in today's climate, it is rarely clear where bargaining ends and principle begins.

"He needs other powers to support him, and it will not be easy to win them over," said Jaleddin Sagheer, a lawmaker and leader of a rival Shiite party. "His policy was never to have allies. He solved crises by creating enemies. He lost politicians' trust."

Changing Dynamic

Maliki seems to be playing an aggressive game with the Americans as well. No one missed the fact that the raid on the camp began as Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates arrived in Iraq -- either a sign of poor planning on Maliki's part or disregard for the U.S. reaction. The raid is the most dramatic of a growing list of moves that suggest Maliki is increasingly willing to act against American interests.

Hours before a bilateral security agreement went into effect Jan. 1, he demanded that U.S. diplomats vacate before midnight a building they had used as an embassy since the war began, forcing them to scramble. On his orders, Iraqi commanders sharply restricted the movement and authority of U.S. troops in Baghdad and other cities after the withdrawal deadline of June 30. And he has ordered that U.S. soldiers stop manning checkpoints in the capital's Green Zone.

No one questions that Americans still carry tremendous influence here. Through a phone call, diplomats say, Vice President Biden was able to help delay a vote on a Kurdish constitution that some Arab officials saw as provocative. But even amid signs of divisions in U.S. policy -- critics describe it as lacking direction -- there remains a sense in Iraq at least that the Americans would like to see Maliki consolidate control as the most expedient way to ensure stability while most U.S. combat troops pull out of Iraq by August 2010.

"I think they're turning the keys over. And that's unfortunate," said an Iraqi official who has been critical of Maliki. "Turning the keys over means that we're creating another strongman in Iraq, and that's just bad for Iraq."

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