A SHATTERED MIRROR IN THE DESERT SAND

POLITICAL SECTARIANISM IN IRAQ

MELISSA CARLSON

INTRODUCTION: A Shattered Mirror in the Desert Sand

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, they stepped into a land of shattered mirrors. Shards of ethnic, religious, and political factions were strewn chaotically across the sand, each glittering angrily in the desert sun. The United States made it its mission to piece these sharp splinters back together, hoping that, once it was made whole, the mirror would reflect a coherent democracy. Little did the United States know that even when glued back together, a shattered mirror reflects a distorted, disjointed image, one that slightly resembles, but never fully captures, a whole, unified entity.

As the end of 2011 approaches and the United States prepares for the withdrawal of its troops, we look back at the time we spent in the region and claim success; the jumbled shards, the isolated and conflicting beliefs have been reorganized and forced together, creating a single whole. However, as we gaze into the shattered mirror that is Iraq, we do not see a unified and democratic state staring back at us. Distinct, sectarian cracks run in between each individual shard prevent them from reflecting an intelligible image. As the sun hits each piece, we can only catch flashes and glimpses of something democratic, of something that resembles freedom, of something that appears unified.

It has been eight years since the initial American invasion of Iraq, six years after ratifying a Constitution; we have watched with bated breath as Iraq held national and local elections, and breathed sighs of relief when all were recognized by international groups as free and fair. Even though Iraq has moved itself closer and closer to democracy, the fractures in this shattered mirror made whole have made Iraq's path of democratic development tenuous and violent. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime and the subsequent institution of a democratic political framework created a vacuum which was quickly filled by competing interests and beliefs of the many factions that had lain dormant under Hussein's authoritarianism. This democratic and free space became a battlefield for sectarianism, with each political, ethnic and religious faction grabbing for as much

power as they could so as to ensure the respect for and the protection of their democratic freedoms. These cracks separating each faction not only crippled the development of a coherent and unified government, but also threatened to shatter the fragile democracy along these lines of sectarianism.

What we see now in Iraq is a democracy divided. Iraq has had two national elections, each of which have rendered a coalition government under the control of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. By examining the factors and conditions that drove the initial outcome of Prime Minister Maliki's coalition government after the 2006 national election and then compare them to the factors and conditions that are shaped the Prime Minister's current coalition government after the 2010 national election, we can clearly see how political sectarianism became even further ingrained within the process Prime Minister Maliki used to unify his coalition government. Prime Minister Maliki's leadership has caused the Iraqi government to become anarchic space in which political factions play a zero-sum game for control of this democracy. In its efforts to balance the power and the competing interests with the government, Prime Minister Maliki under went unifying his coalition government in a way that internalized this political sectarianism rather than resolve it. The entrenched political elite is now so focused on accruing and centralizing power to ensure its own survival that it has forgotten the Iraqi people. Political sectarianism within the government has shifted the focus of Iraqi democracy away from establishing and preserving the rights and freedoms of the people. Because political sectarianism has locked the government in this zero-sum political game and is thus excluding the people from participating in the democratic development of their state, the government is losing its grasp of its fragile democratic legitimacy.

The essay will begin to explore the ways the two Maliki coalitions have instilled political sectarianism by defining what political sectarianism is, and then placing it in the context of the development of Iraq's political landscape since its disintegration after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2001. Understanding the way the political space in Iraq was shaped from the invasion to the point when Prime Minister Maliki was first elected into office in 2006 will give us a better grasp of

the immense influence that political sectarianism has over the Iraqi government. This essay will then look at the coalition government that resulted from the 2006 national elections. In doing so I will look at the different internal and external pressures that Prime Minister Maliki faced when forming this first coalition government as well as the ways he reacted to these pressures. This essay will then turn its attention to Prime Minister Maliki's second coalition government that formed after the 2010 national elections. This section will likewise highlight the internal and external pressures faced by Prime Minister Maliki when forming this government, putting a particular emphasis on the nine-month political stagnation during which Iraq had no government that resulted immediately after the election. This essay will then compare the development of the Prime Minister's two coalition governments, and will discuss the implications of the disconnect between the government and its people that results from the political sectarianism. This essay will conclude by discussing the significance that this internalized political sectarianism has for the United States role in Iraq.

LOOKING INTO THE SHATTERED MIRROR: Political Sectarianism in Context

Definition

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to distinguish between sectarian violence in Iraq and the political sectarianism within the actual Iraqi government. While sectarian violence among religious and ethnic groups in Iraq is an important contributing factor to the country's ability to form a democratic government, this paper focuses specifically on the infighting between the factions within the Iraqi government, and ultimately argues that it is this internalized in-fighting amongst these governmental factions that is currently the largest threat to Iraq's fragile democracy.

In this context, political sectarianism is a phenomenon in which politically close groups prioritize the differences and rivalries that exist amongst themselves. These politically close groups focus on denouncing and exemplifying the disagreements between their beliefs and the beliefs of their fellow political groups. Sectarian groups within a state create a polarized political space in which each group is more concerned with in fighting rather than the interests of the state. These sectarian groups

often share extremely similar political demands, but are unable to meet each other on common ground because of the political squabbling that result from their differences. This section of the essay will place political sectarianism within the context of Iraq's political development, first by briefly explaining the history of Iraq's political development, then by discussing the current democratic structure of government we see in Iraq today as set by the Iraqi constitution, and finishing by laying out the political parties currently competing for power in the Iraqi government today (Sha'ban).

A Brief History of Iraqi Political Development

The Republic of Iraq has undergone many different political transformations since it gained its independence from the League of Nations Mandate under British Administration in 1932. A constitutional monarchy that ruled over both Jordan and Iraq took the place of the British mandate (Time, By That). After suffering from several destabilizing coups, Iraq fell to dictatorial rule. It was in the 1960s that the Ba'ath Party, an Arab-socialist party dedicated to overthrowing what they saw as a corrupt government infected by colonial powers, started to gain favor with and influence over the Iraqi people. The Ba'ath Party gained complete power over the Iraqi government when Saddam Hussein helped them overthrow the current government in 1968. Together the Ba'ath Party and Hussein revitalized and restructured Iraq's political culture so that it resembled past European totalitarian regimes. With the Ba'ath Party as his political base, Hussein became President of Iraq by 1979 and used the party as a means to persecute and discipline the Iraqi people (New York Times-Ba'ath Party). Hussein did whatever was necessary to maintain complete control over his people, with killings on religious and ethnic lines being just the tip of the iceberg.

The dictatorship was destroyed when the United States led a coalition in March of 2003 to overthrow Hussein. After Hussein was removed from power, the U.S. instated the Coalition Provisional Authority in the place of a government, ultimately allowing the U.S. to take on the administration and security of Iraq while Iraqi political leaders worked with their people to create and establish a transitional government. In June 2004 the Iraqi Interim Government was instated in the

place of the provisional authority, which was ultimately replaced by a constitutionally based government in March 2006.

The Structure of the Republic of Iraq

To see the immense impact of political sectarianism within Iraq's government, we must understand the actual structure of the Iraqi government as dictated by the Iraqi constitution that was ratified in 2005. The constitutionally based government that currently stands at the center of Iraqi politics is structured as a parliamentary democracy. If we simply look at the bare skeleton of this governmental structure, we will see that it is a multi-party system in which the executive power lies in the hands of the Prime Minister, who heads the Council of Ministers (which acts as the cabinet) and the President of Iraq, who heads the Presidency Council. The legislative power lies with the Council of Representatives and the Federation Council. Judicial power lies in the Supreme Court who is appointed by the Prime Minister and appointed by the Prime Minister and then reaffirmed by the Council of Representatives. On top of this skeletal frame, there are eighteen governorates that divide Iraq into different geopolitical regions (Time, By That). Each region, or governorate, is given broad autonomy and a broad range of powers over internal security forces.

Even though the Iraqi government follows a typical model of European parliamentary democracy, the Iraqi constitution is unique in the sense that it fuses European civil and Islamic law. This fusion of religion into the Iraqi government creates a stark tension among the political parties within the system. Iraq not only has secular parties with different political perspectives, but parties based on conflicting interpretations of Islam as well. The combination of church and state rather than separation of it within the Iraqi government lends itself to increasing the differences between the political parties, lending itself directly to sectarian relationships amongst the parties rather than cooperative ones. The ingrained religious conflict between the Sunni and Shiite interpretation of Islam projects itself onto the political space in which these political parties operate, increasing the tension along sectarian lines. The not only are there divisions within the political parties of a religious nature,

but also between the religious and secular parties as well. Each party is entrenched with their perspective religious beliefs (or lack thereof), and is thus internalizing the religious conflict that we have seen plaguing the development of Islam within the democratic development of Iraq. Each party is working against the other because they view their other political parties as opposition, rather than a democratic brother. This in itself creates the zero-sum game that we seen played in Iraqi politics today. By trying to create a democratic government based on political ideology framed by religious philosophy and law, Iraq is perpetuating and exaggerating the differences between each political party, making working towards a mutual interest for the people and the state extremely difficult.

The Political Parties of Iraq

By examining the political parties that developed during the transition from the Hussein regime to Prime Minister Maliki's first coalition government, we can likewise gain a better understanding of the political space in which the Iraqi government operates. There are a vast number of political parties that lie on the skeletal structure and form the features of the Iraqi political landscape; however, there are several that have risen as more powerful and influential than the rest. One of these more influential political parties is the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which is a broad-based coalition of over twenty different political groups and is the largest bloc in the Council of Representatives. These twenty groups are dominated by two major Shiite parties, and are defined by its support for radical groups like the Hezbollah movement in Iraq as well as the Anti-American Shiite Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The UIA calls for national unity, the end of the United States' presence, de-politicization of government institutions and the formation of regional governments. This group is supported by Iraq's Shiite majority. Another powerful political party in Iraq is the Kurdistan Alliance (KA). The KA unties the dominant Kurdish parties in Iraq, the Kurdish Democrat Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The KA represents Kurdish interests in the Iraqi Parliament, and strives for freedom, democracy and the expansion of political and constitutional rights for all Iraqi citizens regardless of religious, ethnic and political affiliations. Another political party is the Iraqi National List (INL). This alliance is a

secular nationalist groups consisting of both Sunnis and Shiites, and is led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. This alliance claims to represent the whole of the Iraqi public and strives to build a democratic, secular and modern Iraq that has strong security forces and good relations with its neighbors. This party is strongly supported by the United States, but even so, it lacks the support of Iraqi citizens. Then there is the Iraqi Accord Front, which is the powerful bloc of Sunni parties. This alliance has helped to increase representation of Sunnis in the Iraqi government, and has stressed the importance in ending the United State's presence in Iraq so that a national identity can be created, the constitution revised and laws about de-Baathification and dissolution of Iraqi's armed forces repealed. Other alliances include the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, a non-sectarian coalition that has rejected the new constitution, wants to end the presence of foreign troops and rebuild government institutions, the Kurdistan Islamic Union, a group that has both strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and a long record of providing welfare work and peaceful political campaigning, and the Reconciliation and Liberation Bloc, a Sunni-dominated group that supports armed rebellion against the United State's occupation of Iraq (BBC News).

However, it is not the fact that Iraq posses such a myriad range of political parties that causes the sectarian divides between these parties to be so fierce. These parties have been formed on the basis of a long history of political turmoil, colonial rule, dictatorial rule and foreign occupation. Because of this dynamic and divisive history, the divisions between political parties do not necessarily fall along ethnic or religious differences, ultimately complicating the political landscape. Political parties have broken from coalitions that they share ethnic and religious ties with because another party within the coalition supports the new constitution, United States intervention, a certain radical leader, or different order of priorities. The state of coalitions and political parties within Iraq can be comparable to the United States in the throws of the Civil Rights movement. Like segregationists and anti-segregationists in the United States, there are broad divisions in Iraq among groups that hold beliefs opposite to each other, like the Shiite dominated UIA and the Sunni dominated INL. However, there are also existing

internal-divisions within culturally based coalitions in Iraq as well; like the differences in the political philosophies of the peaceful resistance movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panthers, coalitions in Iraq have broken and separated from each other along similar lines, like the Kurdistan Islamic Union's break from the KA because of disagreement to support the new constitution and then the Kurdistan Islamic subsequent challenge of the KA's political position as the dominant Kurdish coalition. These stark differences create a political impasse that confuses and catalyzes the Iraqi government's ability to govern its people. As it did in the civil rights movement in the United States, this confusion causes political parties to misrepresent and radicalize each other's desires and beliefs. This misunderstanding of each other pitches them against themselves and makes each coalition believe their extreme differences prevent any hope of compromise. This inclination to focus solely on exaggerated differences that separate groups prevents these groups from forming common ground on which they can unite, connect and formulate policy that works towards a mutual benefit.

MALIKI'S FIRST TERM: A Mask of Democracy

Prime Minister Maliki's entered office in 2006 as a man torn between two nations; while he was trying to balance the internal sectarianism and the violent insurgency ripping the country to shreds, he simultaneously was trying to adhere to the demands of the United States to remain moving along the path of democratic development. During Prime Minister Maliki's first term in office, we see the beginnings of a stable democracy, but we see these beginnings being shaped by a man with authoritarian tendencies. The presence of the United States acted as a check to Prime Minister Maliki's tendency towards sectarianism, and forced him to lead the country on the path of democratic development.

Prime Minister Maliki's entrance into office was not a smooth or immediate one. The elections that took place in January 2006 were followed by two months of political deadlock during which the Shiite coalition that had won the majority in the Iraqi Parliament bickered over which candidate to choose for Prime Minister. These two months of political stagnation not only foreshadowed the nine

months of political stagnation and instability that would occur after the second round of national elections in 2010, but also marked the exponential increase in sectarian killings across the nation that would not be abated until the surge of American troops in 2007.

After these two months of political bickering, the Shiite coalition reached a compromise, and named Maliki as their chosen candidate for Prime Minister. As a member of the majority party in the Shiite Coalition, Maliki was known for being one of the more conservative, forceful and outspoken officials ("Nuri Kamal Al-Maliki). Even though he had the reputation of a hard-nosed negotiator, he initially seemed weak and adrift amid the horrific sectarian fighting that plagued the nation. Prime Minister Maliki faced an Iraq that had virtually no democratic track record; he had to figure out the most successful way to move forward with a government comprised of various Shiite, Sunni, multi-sectarian, and Kurdish blocs that each had their own individual agenda.

The 2006 election cemented a new balance of power in the Iraqi government in which the Shiite blocs held the majority. Even though this new distribution of power was achieved by completely democratic means, it uncovered simmering sectarian tensions between the Shiites and the Sunnis, causing many Sunnis to boycott the government. February 2006 saw a massive increase in sectarian violence with a Sunni bombing of the Askariya Mosque in Samarra, one of the most revered Shiite shrines (Sha'ban). This act initiated intensifying attacks of violence against both Sunnis and Shiites that amounted to a civil war. In Baghdad, it soon was not unusual for thirty bodies or more to be found on the streets every day, as Shiite death squads operated without hindrance and Sunnis retaliated by targeting Shiites with explosives. Factions within the government began to take the lead of the Sunni and Shiite sides fighting this war, causing Iraqi politics to become inextricably intertwined with violence.

Prime Minister Maliki quickly gained his footing and seized firm control of his political powers. He pushed for debaathification, and was a backer for strict policies intended to keep former supporters of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime out of power. His policies were indicative of

a terrorist hunt, and specifically targeted Sunnis. The chaos and violence that had been outside his control at the beginning of his term had transformed itself into government-sanctioned oppression of the Sunni population in Iraq, and got to such an extreme point that the United States had to step in and insist that Prime Minister Maliki ease his hard stance debaathification policy (Sha'ban). This initial path of increased sectarianism that the Prime Minister traveled down illustrates the idea that the Iraqi government itself is ill suited for solving its nation's problems. One of the main reasons why Prime Minister Maliki placed such an intense focus on the debaathification process was because he did not understand, he could not recognize the proper way to go about reversing the authoritarianism from the Hussein regime and institute a functioning democracy.

By following the requests of the United States to pursue legislation that reduced the sectarianism within the country rather than increase it, Prime Minister Maliki was able to gain control of his government and country in a more democratic manner. The growing cooperation between Prime Minister Maliki and the United States military presence in Iraq essentially allowed the United States to drastically increase the amount of troops it had in Iraq in 2007 and instate a new counterinsurgency strategy. The "surge" of United States troops and their effectiveness in quelling the violence made Prime Minister Maliki increasingly confident in his military might. This newfound confidence drove the Prime Minister to expand his operations against insurgents and other militants that had, up to this point, been exclusively fighting American troops. Moqtada al-Sadr, a radically anti-American cleric who was one of Prime Minister Maliki's Shiite allies in the coalition government and whose followers were responsible for some of the worst brutality in Baghdad, was one of the many Iraqis that the Prime Minister began to fight back against, and eventually force into exile (Sha'ban). Prime Minister Maliki depended on significant assistance from American forces to succeed in his campaign against the insurgency, but succeed he did. The expansive and aggressive campaign against insurgents prompted Iraqi and American officials to spend most of 2008 negotiating a new security agreement in which a general time horizon was set for the redeployment of foreign troops from Iraq. This new security

agreement ultimately manifested itself into a pledge that all American combat forces would be removed from Iraqi cities by June of 2009 and the whole country by 2011 (Time). The end of Prime Minister Maliki's first term saw significant control over combat operations being passed from the United States into the hands of Iraqi security forces as American combat troops began to leave Iraqi cities, adding strength and solidarity to the idea of Iraqi sovereignty.

It is important to recognize the fact that even though Prime Minister Maliki prided himself as being the leader who ended the bloodshed and foreign occupation of Iraq, he could not have done so without the powerful support of the United States. During his first coalition government, Prime Minister Maliki governed Iraq in conjunction with the United States. It was the United States, and not Prime Minister Maliki, that forced Iraqi political factions into a democratic framework. Because the support the United States provided was predominantly military in nature, Prime Minister Maliki did not prioritize the building of democratic institutions once his country was relatively stable. There was a lack of development and jobs, grinding poverty, corruption and feeble services. In his efforts to quell sectarian violence, Prime Minister Maliki became dependent on the military power of the United States. He did not develop any sense of democracy during his first term, but rather learned that stability can be attained and preserved through increased military control. Order throughout the country may have been restored, but conflict was still very much alive and seething under the surface. Prime Minister Maliki's dependence on the United States combat forces to maintain order merely increased the suspicion and doubt among Iraqis as to how the Iraqi security forces would handle the violence after the United States left. Still remembering the way Prime Minister Maliki began his term with a violent and systemic targeting of Sunnis through his push for 'debaathification,' many of the Iraqi people feared that, in the absence of the United States, the Prime Minister would fall back to his authoritarian style of ensuring democratic stability.

POLITICAL SECTARIANISM AND STAGNATION: A Period of No Government

The end of Prime Minister Maliki's first term rendered an Iraq that was on a United States

sanctioned path of democratic development; political sectarianism and the violence of the insurgency was decreasing, and the fragile Iraqi democracy showed more signs of strength and solidification. In March 2010 Iraq held its second round of elections since its emergence as a democracy (State Department). While the March 2010 elections were yet another mark of the successful development of the Iraqi democratic republic, they also laid bare Iraq's fractured and jaded political nature that has persisted throughout its transition from dictatorial to democratic governance. Even though Prime Minister Maliki's wide spread popularity as the leader who stopped the cycle of violence that almost consumed Iraq pointed to him easily obtaining enough support for a second term, the months immediately before the election revealed that his chances were far less than certain. Prime Minister Maliki ran his re-election campaign on the grounds that, if elected, he would form a broader, cross-sectarian coalition that would include Sunnis, Kurds and other minority groups. However, other opposition parties followed suit, claiming that the Iraqi 'national unity' that would arise under the governance of Maliki would be a unity ruled by an iron hand. Prime Minister Maliki's supporters even acknowledged that the months leading up to the election revealed him as isolated, impervious and impetuous. His chances for re-election were damaged by a flux in insurgent violence, which even further confirmed the Iraqi people's beliefs that a government under the rule of the current Prime Minister would be unable to maintain the fragile democracy instated by the United States.

The elections once again held a Shiite majority, but the Shiite coalition led by Prime Minister Maliki was overtaken by an opposing Shiite coalition led by Ayad Allawi, a secular leader who appealed to both Shiites and Sunnis. Prime Minister Maliki vigorously challenged these results, throwing the government and the nation into political turmoil. For nine long months after the elections in March 2010, Iraq was locked in a state of bare-knuckle back room bargaining as to who should receive the nomination for the position of Prime Minister: Mr. Allawi or Mr. Maliki. These two politicians were locked into a stalemate, but on October 1, 2010, the stalemate was broken when Prime Minister Maliki gained the support of an anti-American Shiite Islamic movement led by the exiled

cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. This drastic and quick change in support came as a surprise, especially since there has been widespread opposition for Maliki to return to leadership, and Maliki had aligned himself with the United States against al-Sadr during his first term. The Kurds then indicated they would support Maliki's re-election as long as they would be able to hold onto the presidency. This shift in support increased tension within the Iraqi government because it excluded the Sunnis, who largely supported Mr. Allawi for the nomination. An agreement between the two Shiite coalitions was reached in November 2010 that allowed Maliki to remain as Prime Minister as long as Mr. Allawi's party gained a significant share of cabinet positions. Even after this deal was struck, political squabbling over the details of the agreement dragged on, and it was not until mid-December that Mr. Allawi gave his grudging approval.

Even though Maliki has assured that he will include all factions within the formation of a new government and prevent the sectarian carnage that consumed Iraq in the past from rising again, his alliance with the Sadrist movement (a movement that was blamed for much of the sectarian violence) is a cause of worry not only for the other parties and the people of Iraq, but the United States as well. The Sadrist movement is closely allied with Iran, and heavily opposes the presence of American troops in Iraq (New York times—Myers). While the fact that Prime Minister Maliki was able to unite factions within the Shiite coalitions indicates that the factional Iraqi political landscape is uniting to form a basis upon which to operate, it also embodies the mounting division of support for who should govern Iraq, especially since there is a bitter historical opposition between Prime Minister Maliki and al-Sadr. This tenuous rivalry now inherent within Prime Minister Maliki's second term hints at the possibility of radical religious movements resorting to violence in order to ensure that their desires are fulfilled.

In many ways, the nine months of political stagnation resemble the two months after the national elections in 2006. This pattern of political squabbling, this inability of political factions in the Iraqi government to agree on how and who should govern their democracy have solidified and internalized the ethnic and sectarian divisions unleashed by the American-led invasion in 2003.

Despite a conscious effort by most parties to appeal to nationalist sentiments during the 2010 election process, the demarcations of Sunni Arab, Shiite Arab or Kurd among the political parties have stonewalled attempts to solve the country's issue of unity and power-sharing. However, the drawn out political struggle for the position of Prime Minister further established Prime Minister Maliki as a shrewd authoritarian who used the political process to consolidate his own power and neutralize his rivals. These authoritarian tendencies framed the way Prime Minister Maliki would begin his second term, ultimately centering Iraq's increasing independence from the United States on establishing and maintaining a national unity with an iron fist.

MALIKI'S SECOND TERM: A Grasp for Power

When Prime Minister Maliki began his second term as leader of the Iraqi democracy, he faced a country on the brink of instability, the seething political sectarianism beneath the surface threatening the power he just barely won. Violence is still endemic in northern cities of Iraq where Kurds, Arabs, and other groups fight for control. The insurgency, while not as prominent as before, still continues to flare up in brutal attacks. Fissures in the Shiite coalition are becoming more and more visible, particularly concerning how to address the remnants of the American military force and the question of whether their impending withdrawal in December 2011 should be put on hold (Leland, John).

Throughout these internal and external factors, Prime Minister Maliki is trying to maintain a hold of the political power he just barely won over a power-sharing government that provides representation of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurds. The nine months of political stagnation and the fact that he initially did not win the nomination for the position of Prime Minister places Prime Minister Maliki in a position of less power than he was in at the beginning of his coalition after the 2006 election. Prime Minister Maliki not only has a reputation among the Iraqi people as an authoritarian leader, but also has less political legitimacy. He had to fight tooth and nail to hold onto power because his people did not elect him. His manipulation of the political process so as to maintain his powerful position stands contradictory to the democratic process, ultimately increasing the tension between Sunnis and Shiites

as well as the government and the people.

Many Sunnis consider the unity government a mask for increasingly centralized control by the Shiite majority.   The increasing power of the Shiite majority can be seen through the strengthening relationship between Prime Minister Maliki and the anti-American cleric al-Sadr, the man to who the Prime Minister owes his election (Leland). As noted earlier in this essay, Prime Minister Maliki's first coalition government would not have survived as a democracy without the support and leadership of the United States. With the current agreement between the United States and Iraq being such that United States military forces will leave the country at the end of December 2011, there will be a huge gap in the support structure of the Iraqi government and security forces. Fearing that the current Iraqi security forces will not be strong enough to maintain control once the United States leaves, American military leaders and Iraqi politicians have discussed the possibility of the United States extending its military presence after the December 2011 deadline (Schmidt). The continued presence has been met with staunch opposition by al-Sadr, who turned out thousands of protesters after United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates mentioned the idea of continued American military presence. Prime Minister Maliki stands alongside al-Sadr in demanding United States withdrawal, showing a drastic shift from when he aligned with the United States against the violence of al-Sadr during his first coalition government. Prime Minister Maliki has begun to incorporate the demands of al-Sadr within his power-sharing government in order to fill the increasing hole left in the Iraqi government by the decreasing role of the United States in Iraqi affairs. The Prime Minister is reshaping the Iraqi government in order to ensure that it can survive independently from the United States. However, in doing so, the Prime Minister is reaching out to political groups similar to his own that have enough power to establish some sort of unity within the government and ensure his continued power as Prime Minister. Prime Minister Maliki's strengthened relationship with al-Sadr points to the fact that any United States presence in Iraq after the December 2011 deadline will be unwelcome, and create more hostility rather than abate it.

Even though it initially seemed as if there was a cohesiveness growing among the different institutions and that the fragile Iraqi democracy would be able to stand, there are now growing concerns that Prime Minister Maliki's government is undermining this democracy by stifling dissent and consolidating power within the office of the Prime Minister. He is establishing institutions that are accountable to him and him alone (Healy – Protests). Even though the turmoil of the Arab Spring that has been affecting so many other Middle Eastern countries has passed over Iraq, there were pro-democracy movements in February in which demonstrators demanded better government services after years of war and deprivation. They were not looking to topple their fragile democracy, but actually see it put into action. Prime Minister Maliki met these demonstrations with a heavy hand, sending in security forces that put down the protests with more violence than was necessary for the situation (Arango).

Prime Minister Maliki's expansion of executive power can likewise be seen through a high court ruling in January 2010 that gave him control of the once-independent agencies responsible for running the country's central bank, conducting elections and investigating corruption. A month after that ruling, two leading human rights groups reported that forces that report directly to Prime Minister Maliki in violation of the country's constitution were running secret jails where detainees had been tortured (Healy – Demonstrations). Prime Minister Maliki has continued to expand his power over different government agencies to control over the branches themselves. A high court ruling in July 2010 held that members of Parliament no longer possessed the power to propose legislation. All new laws would be proposed by the Prime Minister, his cabinet, or the president, and then passed to Parliament for a vote. There is no other parliamentary democracy in existence that has such restrictions. Many people likewise fear that Prime Minister Maliki will now have the power to order Iraq's central bank to print money to cover Iraq's growing budget deficits. Such a move would weaken the values of Iraqi currency and lead to rapid inflation, crippling Iraq's feeble economy even further (Healy – Protest).

The United States presence in Iraq has thus far acted as a check to Prime Minister Maliki's authoritarian tendencies to increase his power so as to be able to maintain stability and his own political survival. As the United States prepares to leave Iraq at the end of the year, the responsibility to check the Prime Minister rests largely on the Parliament. However, the divisiveness within the Parliament has given the Prime Minister the opportunity to constrain the power of the Parliament itself, ultimately taking away its means to do anything even if it was able to unite against Prime Minister Maliki. The legacy that the United States leaves at the end of an eight-year occupation is a Prime Minister that manipulated a democratic election and has expanded his control so that he has far more power than the Iraqi constitution ever intended for a Prime Minister to have. In his attempts to gain control of his country and ensure its stability, Prime Minister Maliki is adopting a style of leadership indicative of a dictator. This style of leadership has caused the Prime Minister's focus to shift away from eradicating political sectarianism within the government to simply holding each warring political faction arrested under his expansive executive power. By allowing the influence of the Shiite factions to increase, the Prime Minister has threatened the stability and effectiveness of his power-sharing government, ultimately internalizing the resentment and the tension between each competing sectarian group in the government.

A SHATTERED RELATIONSHIP: The Divide Between the Iraqi People and their Government

Political sectarianism in Iraq impedes the promotion of democracy that grants the majority the right to govern and the minority the right to oppose. It spreads chaos and instability. Even though free, democratic elections exist, the beliefs of these sectarian political factions have individual identities so strong that the Iraqi people choose to vote for the representatives that represent their own ethnicity or religion. The differences that these sectarian groups fight over so vehemently prevent a unified, national identity from forming. The people themselves thus cannot unite together as a coherent whole and support their government. The unity of the people is crucial to a developing democracy. We also see that the political sectarianism lends itself beautifully to feeding into the zero-sum political game

played by the political factions within the government, allowing politicians like Prime Minister Maliki to grab for power and manipulate the outcome of the elections themselves. Prime Minister Maliki's manipulation of the 2010 elections and his most recent trend towards centralizing power in order to maintain control over the sectarian violence in Iraq has caused the Iraqi people to distrust the government (Healy – Demonstrations). They are still haunted by the ghost of the Hussein dictatorship, and with the median age of the Iraqi population trending younger than that of Tunisia or Egypt, many believe that Prime Minister Maliki embodies the sectarian values of the older generation that lived under Hussein's oppressive regime. Since political sectarianism is the only entity these older Iraqi politicians have lived with, they cannot even begin to understand what democracy means, or how to sustain it (Arango).

Many Iraqis are thus cynical about their political class and the ability of the government to quell the sectarian tensions that are always boiling at the surface and erupting into violence. The hearts and minds of the Iraqi citizens must be won over by the Iraqi government; the economic disparity that currently exists in Iraq will only destroy faith in democracy, rather than inspire it. As Iraq has undergone the transition between an authoritarian regime and a parliamentary democracy, one of the main issues that has catalyzed the division between the Iraqi parliament and its people is the economic disparity of the general populous. The economic distribution of wealth among the people of Iraq has created two classes, one which is a minority of wealthy government officials who can afford trips outside Iraq, who have the means to transcend the poverty and violence that defines their undefined state; the rest of Iraq, the majority, live below the poverty line. Recently violent riots have erupted over lack of drinking water, electricity and other basic services (New York Times - Ghazi). The success and stability of a new democracy is the formation of solid political institutions that organize and control economic reform and development. Currently, the fragile Iraqi government is catering not to Iraq as a whole, but rather to the individuals in the Iraqi parliament. Even during the nine months during which the government was essentially nonexistent, Parliamentary members earned "salaries of

about $11,050 a month each, which include a housing allowance; a fleet of three brand-new armored

sport utility vehicles and a 30-member security detail for their use; freshly issued diplomatic passports,

which allow for worry-free international travel; and government payments into pension plans that will

yield 80 percent of their salaries"(New York Times - Ghazi). This obvious misuse of government

funds brings to mind the political corruption Iraqis tried to defeat, once and for all, in the 2006 and the

2010 elections. A stagnant economy alongside misdistribution of wealth, among other basic

democratic services that are not being provided to the people, have caused Iraqis to lose faith in their

government and in democracy's ability to provide for their basic needs for survival.

As more and more people come to believe that this 'older generation' of politicians is unable

to unify the country and provide their people basic democratic rights and services, the government is

quickly losing its public support, and thus its legitimacy. Political sectarianism has held the

government in stagnation, and as this unity government is showing increased signs of splintering over

the United States- backed power-sharing agreement, the fear that the slim majority of Shiite parties led

by Prime Minister Maliki will use his almost exclusive power over Iraqi security forces to take control,

resulting in even more divisiveness and violence. These Iraqi politicians that are in love with power

and obsessed with maintaining a power-sharing government that has an unequal distribution of power

in their political faction's favor have ultimately prevented a new political class from emerging to take

Iraq into a new democratic future (Arango).

CONCLUSION: Implications for the United States

Iraq's inability to unite and form a coherent, cohesive government embodies the sectarianism

and fragmentation that has held and still holds the Arab world in a shattered state of arrested

development. The perpetual absence of a government has created a vacuum of psychological

emptiness, with the absence only becoming more apparent as the Obama administration removed

troops from Iraq on August 31, 2010 (Schmidt). The lack of a government and some semblance of

unity and involvement between the people, the government, and the parliamentary members

themselves have not only allowed the people to lose faith in democracy's ability to effectively govern a state, but also to lose of faith in the United States' ability as the hegemonic military power in the international arena. The success and stability of the Iraqi government stands as a key stone around which the strength and influence of United States foreign policy in the Middle East revolves. Instilling and ensuring the success of a democratic government in Iraq will provide a model for democratic development for the rest of the Middle East. The more friendly the Middle East is and the more accepting it is of Western politics will determine the strength of the position held by the U.S. in Middle East and define U.S. interests in the region.

However, the removal of the United States military presence from Iraq at the end of December 2011, the capability of Iraqi security forces to maintain stability within the region, and the ingrained political sectarianism within the government have placed the Iraqi government on a slippery slope. The increasing disconnect between the people and their government and Prime Minister Maliki's attempts to maintain stability through centralizing power are already indicators that Iraq is sliding from the path of democracy to an authoritarian form of governance. Iraq's trend towards an authoritarian form of governance holds greater and greater consequences for the United States as anti-American political parties within the government gain more and more influence over the government. Prime Minister Maliki's relationship with the radical and violent anti-American Shiite cleric al-Sadr shows a shift away from the desires and recommendations of the United States. The relationship between Prime Minister Maliki and al-Sadr is not only leading the Iraqi government to be more and more unfriendly to and uncooperative with United States' presence in the region, but also points to a stronger regional connection to Shiite groups in Syria and Iran. If the United States loses Iraq to a regional Shiite influence, its position in the region will be compromised.

The end of Prime Minister Maliki's second term will be a turning point in the development of the Iraqi democracy. Even though he has released a statement that he will not seek re-election, his tenacious behavior and refusal to give up his power in the 2010 elections as well as his recent attempts

to restructure the power scheme of the government so that it begins and ends with him indicate otherwise. Prime Minister Maliki is using the political sectarianism amongst the political parties to his advantage. The zero-sum political space in which these parties compete over government representation lends itself to one individual rising more powerful above the rest. Prime Minister Maliki is sliding further and further along this slippery slope, and is pulling the Iraqi democracy down with him.

Works Cited

Arango, Tim. "In Iraq, Bottoms Up for Democracy." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News &*

    Multimedia. New York Times, 16 Apr. 2011. Web. 02 May 2011.

    <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/weekinreview/17booze.html?ref=iraq>.

1979, By. "Baath Party News - The New York Times." *Times Topics*. 03 Oct. 2010. Web. 03 Oct.

    2010. <http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/organizations/b/baath

    _party/index.html>.

"BBC NEWS | Middle East | Guide to Iraqi Political Parties." *BBC News - Home*. Web. 03 Oct.

    2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4511450.stm>.

"BBC News - Profile: Nouri Maliki." *BBC - Homepage*. BBC, 21 Dec. 2010. Web. 02 May 2011.

    <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11733715>.

Blanchard, Christopher M. *Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy*. Rep. no. RL33793.

    Print.

"CIA - The World Factbook." *Welcome to the CIA Web Site — Central Intelligence Agency*. Web.

    03 Oct. 2010. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-

    factbook/geos/iz.html>.

Healy, Jack, and Michael Schmidt. "Demonstrations Turn Violent in Iraq." *The New York Times - Breaking*

    News, World News & Multimedia. New York Times, 25 Feb. 2011. Web. 02 Mar. 2011.

    <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26iraq.html?sq=Iraq>.

Healy, Jack, and Michael Schmidt. "Protest Organizers Ordered to Shut Offices in Iraq - NYTimes.com."

    The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. New York Times, 07 Mar.

2011. Web. 02 Apr. 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/08/world/middleeast/08iraq.html

?ref=nurikamalalmaliki>.

Leland, John, and Jack Healy. "After Months, Iraqi Lawmakers Approve a Government." New York Times,

21 Dec. 2010. Web. 6 Feb. 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/22/world/middleeas

t/22iraq.html>.

"Nuri Kamal Al-Maliki." *Times Topic*. New York Times, 4 Mar. 2011. Web. 7 Apr. 2011.

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/nuri_kamal_al-

maliki/index.html?inline=nyt-per>.

Schmidt, Michael, and Tim Arango. "Adm. Mike Mullen Says Iraq Must Decide If U.S. Troops Will Stay -

NYTimes.com." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*. New York

Times, 22 Apr. 2011. Web. 02 May 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/middleeast/23iraq.html?ref=iraq>.

SHA'BAN, ABD AL-HUSSEIN. "Shi'i Politics and the Sectarian Crisis in Iraq." *Arab Reform Bulletin*.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 Feb. 2008. Web. 02 May 2011.

<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show>.

"Steven Lee Myers - The New York Times." *Times Topics*. 03 Oct. 2010. Web. 03 Oct. 2010.

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/steven_lee_my

ers/index.html>.

Time, By That. "Iraq." *U.S. Department of State*. Web. 03 Oct. 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/e

i/bgn/6804.htm>.

"Williams Ghazi-The New York Times." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News &*

Multimedia. Web. 03 Oct. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/20/world/middle

east/20iraq.html?emc=eta1>.