

Iraq's New Leader Will Fail Without Western Support

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By Ahmed Rashid

What is it about political leaders installed by America in third world countries? It seems they never want to leave office. It started in Vietnam in the 1960s, where the CIA ruthlessly removed Vietnamese leaders who at first were useful to the US occupation, but refused to step down when they were not.

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan was a darling of Washington after the attacks of September 11 2001. Now he is a [hate figure](#) in the US capital, alleged to have allowed rigged elections that have plunged the country into an ethnic crisis that pitches Pashtuns against Tajiks. And then there is Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. [For months](#), most Iraqis and foreign diplomats have been united in one chorus: "anyone but Maliki."

The tragedy with all these leaders - worthy of Shakespearean drama - is that they never know when to give up. The trouble is that they consider themselves indispensable. They are chosen for their willingness to lead inclusively, but they soon give one ethnic or religious group all the power.

So it was with the Shia leader Mr Maliki, who was elected with US and Iranian blessing in 2006 and for a second time, albeit more reluctantly, in 2010. He lost the trust of everyone, including his fellow Shia in Iran.

Even before the April elections, many were hoping he would step aside. Ultimately it was Iran's displeasure at his inability to command broad support, and his refusal to admit Sunnis into his government, that forced him to step aside. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had publicly distanced himself from Mr Maliki for months, as had Iraq's most influential cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In his last days he had called up troops and threatened a military coup, but it was of no use.

Mr Maliki's replacement is Haider al-Abadi, 62, a member of Mr. Maliki's own Dawa party, also a Shia, who was chosen on Monday by Iraq's president. Mr Abadi is being asked to rise above sectarianism and create an inclusive national unity government that satisfies the minorities, particularly the Sunnis.

Mr Abadi will not be able to achieve anything at home or abroad until he forms a broad-based government. It will not help if Mr Maliki is given another important post in the new government to keep him quiet, as rumours in Baghdad portend. His time is over, his political baggage too much. He should go home or into exile.

Iraq desperately needs a government of national consensus to face the military onslaught from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis), which now controls perhaps one-third of the country. Iran is just as scared of Isis as the Americans are.

Isis is also targeting Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, but it is the cohesion of Iraq which is vital because it has borders with all these important Arab states. If Iraq does not hang together and is divided up by Isis and others, there is little doubt that it could lead to the balkanization of the entire Arab world at the hands of Islamic extremists.

One key for Iraq's salvation is winning back the trust of the international community. Washington applied pressure on Mr Maliki by withholding important arms supplies to Iraq such as fighter bombers until he stepped down.

Now that [he has gone](#), the US needs to fulfil its promises as soon as possible. Iraq lacks a proper air force. Its army is also in disarray and needs international help to make it a sufficiently strong enough force to take on Isis and win.

Iraq's crisis is multiple and intensely complicated - nobody had even heard of the Yazidis until Isis began to massacre them and they escaped into the mountains of northern Iraq. Few can focus on the fact that, in June and July alone, the war against Isis has created half a million more internally displaced Iraqis. UN agencies cannot cope.

Imagine what else lies in store. Imagine the consequences for the entire Middle East if Mr Abadi's new government were to fail. Imagine if Isis were to have a free run of Iraq with all its sensitive borders. It is time for the west to show much greater support for the government in Baghdad.