

HOW MUTHANNA WAS WON

A Party Switch Breaks a Deadlock; Maliki v. Hakim in a Zero-Sum Game

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SAMAWA, MUTHANNA, IRAQ – Following Iraq's January 31 provincial elections, Iraqi Prime Minister **Nuri al-Maliki** installed one governor after another across Iraq's nine southern provinces, his **Rule of Law Coalition** having won a plurality of votes in each. In almost every case (everywhere but Maysan), Maliki chose to coalition with the Sadrists and other factions to exclude **Shahid al-Mihrab**, the provincial electoral list of the **Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)** led by **Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim**.

Yet in Muthanna, a large but sparsely populated southern province bordering Saudi Arabia, the coalitions of the two men were equally matched at 13 seats each. The decision to switch sides by **Ibrahim Salman al-Miyali**, an independent running on Maliki's list, gave Hakim his sole governorship.

- *Muthanna shows that the contest between Maliki and Hakim has become a zero-sum game.* Despite public displays of cordiality between the two Shia leaders and high-profile discussions about a new national coalition, there is no desire from Maliki's side to share power. From the time that Maliki became prime minister in 2006, Hakim treated him like a junior partner, and the signs of conflict became increasingly obvious in the run-up to the election in January. Maliki is now determined to rule without him.

The Coalition Process

Iraq's provincial governors are not directly elected but rather chosen by the provincial councils following elections. After the council is sworn in, it must elect a council chairman when it first meets, and then a governor, two deputy governors and a deputy chairman. Since the electoral law and Iraq's fractured polity make it very difficult for a single faction to win a majority, a coalition of parties must negotiate a leadership slate. This process was resolved through negotiations in all the Shia provinces except for Muthanna by late April. In Muthanna, the deadlock was broken only when Miyali suddenly switched sides.

According to *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, the coalitions broke down as follows.¹ Maliki's coalition included the Rule of Law Coalition (his own list), National Reform Current (Ibrahim al-Jaafari), the Independent Notables Current (Sadrists) and the Assembly for Central Euphrates. Hakim's coalition included Shahid al-Mihrab (his own list), al-Jumhur, Assembly for Muthanna, and the National Independent List. The other

list, Independent Assembly of Technocrats, had two seats; one went with Maliki while the other threw his lot in with Hakim, tying the coalitions at 13 seats each.

A number of news sources singled out Miyali and quoted him as a source well before the vote on what was going to happen, noting that he was an independent member of Maliki's Rule of Law list (meaning he was not part of Maliki's Dawa Party inner circle). For example, the Iraqi *al-Itthad* quoted him extensively on March 31, and one comment attributed to him was that Maliki's list "is the closest to achieving a majority in the council..."² A provincial publication interestingly quoted Miyali on April 2 as saying that he thought a deal would be brokered at the center: "there are centralized coalitions by the leaders of the parties which will be formed in the coming weeks which will change the political map... in the province of Muthanna."³ The London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat* also turned to Miyali for an opinion, quoting him on April 6 as saying that things were deadlocked but soon the council would meet, and if they couldn't come to an agreement, they would turn to the judiciary.⁴

How ISCI Won

That Maliki left Miyali off the short list for leadership positions may have influenced him. According to *Voices of Iraq News Agency* on April 29,⁵ the day before the key vote, the main candidates of the Maliki coalition for governor were Abd al-Munam Salih (from Jaafari's list), Waidi Rahim al-Debaj (a Sadrist) and Saad Hamza (an independent), and for chairman or deputy chairman, Hakim Khazal, Qasim Tahmaz, Salam Jasim Mayuf and Fahd Saif Faisal. The article also quotes a member from Hakim's coalition as saying that ISCI's key candidates were **Ahmad Marzuk al-Salal** (the incumbent governor), **Abd al-Latif Hassan al-Hassani** (ultimately chosen as chairman) and Abd al-Hussein Muhammad Allaj. Miyali was not mentioned.

Also notable is that Miyali was the chief administrative officer (like a mayor, but unelected) for Samawa under the previous administration.⁶ Since Muthanna was ISCI-dominated during the 2005-2009 period, Miyali would have been part of Hakim's patronage network, and Maliki must have thought he was pulling off a coup by getting Miyali to join his list. But Miyali's relationship with Hakim's people during four years of ISCI rule should have made his loyalty suspect.

When the vote broke, these were the results: Ibrahim al-Miyali as governor, Abd al-Latif Hassan al-Hassani of Shahid al-Mihrab as chairman, **Qasim Jabir** (former member of the council and head of the National Independent List) as deputy governor, and **Hakim Yasser** (Assembly of Technocrats) as second deputy governor. The Iraqi news website *al-Awsati* quoted a member of Maliki's coalition as accusing ISCI of using "immoral methods" to lure away one of their faction by offering him a position "and we were not expecting that from him." The remaining 12 members of Maliki's side then withdrew from the council in protest.⁷ The election of the deputy chairman was postponed.

An examination of the votes received by individual candidates in the election indicates that the choices reflected political needs, not popular support for individual candidates.

Under the voting system it was possible for voters to vote for either a list or an individual candidate or both. The Basra newspaper *al-Mannarah* has published a breakdown of the number of votes received by individual candidates and lists in Muthanna. The incumbent ISCI governor Ahmad Marzuk al-Salal received the most votes of the 26 winning candidates with 4,197. In second place was Hassani, with 3,097 votes (the article notes that he is the brother of the late governor Muhammad Ali al-Hassani, who was assassinated in 2007 and replaced with Salal). Miyali came in 11th with 1,711, so he was barely above average. Hakim Yasseri, who became second deputy governor, came one notch above Miyali with 1,717 votes. Remember that his list, Assembly of Technocrats, had only two seats, and that one split for each coalition. So Yasseri, like Miyali, was a defector, and did not run as an open ally of ISCI. So in the end, ISCI placed its own man as head of the council, and gave two of the top three executive posts to defectors in order to win control.⁸

Maliki as Sore Loser

Having lost by methods they viewed as unseemly, Maliki's coalition claimed the election was not legal and tried to block it even after it was confirmed by the presidency. First they tried to prevent the necessary quorum from forming by withdrawing. *Al-Itthad* quotes an unnamed member of Maliki's coalition as saying that "Ibrahim Miyali betrayed us," adding that they withdrew from the council not only as a protest but as a deliberate attempt to prevent the council from forming a legal quorum.⁹

*Al-Malaf Press*¹⁰ has quoted **Buha al-Arji**, chairman of the parliament's judiciary committee, as explaining that Article 1(7) of the provincial government law stipulates that absent a majority, the oldest member of the council is by default made chairman, and only he can call the council to order. But the oldest councilman, Reza Abu Hassnah, wasn't even aware of the meeting (being a member of Maliki's coalition), and therefore it was really a "secret party meeting" and not a legal council meeting. Since the law requires an outright majority – in this case, 14 – for a quorum, and one of those 14 – Miyali – nominated himself as governor, the total present to vote fell to 13 and the quorum was lost.

- *Note that Arji is a member of the Sadrist bloc in parliament, and the Sadrist list is part of Maliki's coalition in Muthanna, so this is not a neutral source. Maliki and the Sadrists fought a war in 2008, but ISCI and Hakim have always been the Sadrists' main enemy, and their new provincial alliance has just one goal – to keep ISCI out of power.*

The Maliki-Sadrist legal challenge hasn't gone anywhere, and Miyali is still in office. ISCI's media outlets have been running reports of ISCI leaders meeting with officials in Maysan and Muthanna, without noting that these two provinces happen to be the two where they are still in power. On June 26, al-Forat, ISCI's television network, ran a report of the new governor and chairman meeting in Baghdad with Iraqi Vice-President **Adel Abd al-Mahdi**, ISCI's highest ranking official nationwide.¹¹

Having used Miyali to maintain power in Muthanna, ISCI will be sure to cultivate him. The report stated that the discussion focused on central government funding for local development projects, the Iraqi version of pork-barrel politics. The real focus of the meeting was surely how to keep ISCI in power there and increase their share of the vote for next year's parliamentary elections. It is quite clear now that they will need to do well if they want to take part in any Maliki-led government.

¹ "Rule of Law and Shahid al-Mihrab Compete to Achieve Majority in Muthanna," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, March 31, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/wp-content/themes/aswat/print.php?p=137319>).

² "Allied Blocs Prepare to Name Executive and Legislative Positions in the Provinces," *al-Itthad*, March 31, 2009 (<http://www.alitthad.com/paper.php?name=News&file=article&sid=52202>).

³ "Member of New Council Reveals Existence of Centralized Coalitions which will Change Map of Coalitions in the Province," *Samawh*, April 2, 2009 (<http://www.samawh.com/news.php?readmore=1381>).

⁴ "Dawa Pulls the Floor Out from Under the Feet of the Supreme Council in South-Central Iraq," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 6, 2009 (<http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11087&article=513972&feature=>).

⁵ "Governor of Muthanna: Formation of New Local Government Tomorrow," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, April 29, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/wp-content/themes/aswat/print.php?p=142482>).

⁶ "Presidency Issues State Decree Appointing Governor of Muthanna," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, May 14, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/wp-content/themes/aswat/print.php?p=144677>). It is a matter of formal procedure that once the new leadership is elected, the vote is ratified by the Iraqi presidency. This article notes Miyali's background under the previous administration and gives his full name as Ibrahim Salman Jabar al-Miyali.

⁷ "The Supreme Council Takes Control of Council in Muthanna and Elects Defecting Member of Maliki's List Governor," *al-Awsati*, May 1, 2009 (http://www.alawsati.com/news_view_16514.html). On the results, also see "Muthanna Council Completes Distribution of Positions in the Absence of 12 Members," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, April 30, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/wp-content/themes/aswat/print.php?p=142637>).

⁸ "Ahmad Marzuk al-Salal Receives Most Votes in Muthanna," *al-Mannarah*, retrieved June 27, 2009 (<http://www.almannarah.com/Print.aspx?NewsID=8793>). Anyone reading the original source should note that in matching up names, there are some discrepancies in terms of how individual candidates' names are formed. This is entirely normal in Iraq, where the names used by candidates in the media very often do not match the formal name used on the electoral rolls, and often differ from one news source to the other.

⁹ "Formation of Opposition Coalition Within New Muthanna Provincial Council," *al-Itthad*, May 2, 2009 (<http://www.alitthad.com/paper.php?name=News&file=print&sid=53998>).

¹⁰ "Presidency Approves Appointment of Muthanna Governor and Parliamentary Committee Considers it in Violation," *al-Malaf Press*, May 19, 2009 (<http://almalafpress.net/index.php?d=128&id=85915>).

¹¹ "Vice-President Adel Abd al-Mahdi Meets with Muthanna Governor, Council Chairman and Members," *al-Forat*, April 24, 2009 (<http://www.alforattv.net/?show=news&action=article&id=38915>). I note that the picture shows Abd al-Mahdi meeting with 12 individuals. I doubt any of those include the 12 members of Maliki's coalition in the province. A separate news report indicates that Ammar al-Hakim, currently being groomed to take over ISCI from his father, has visited Muthanna. "Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim Visits the Province of Muthanna," *al-Fadn*, May 29, 2009 (<http://www.alfadn.com/news.php?action=view&id=1591>).