Post-Election Elite Bargaining and Coalition Formation in the MENA: Lessons from Iraq and Morocco

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Abstract

This article analyses the dynamics of post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation in the cases of Iraq and Morocco, demonstrating that, despite widely differing contexts, the outcome is often far removed from the election results. Recent works on political parties in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have alluded to this state of affairs, but, so far, the scholarship is missing in-depth comparative studies of the intricate dynamics of elite bargaining and coalition formation. Beyond not necessarily connecting to the election results, but rather being rooted in competition over access to patronage resources and power, our comparison demonstrates the negative impact that this state of affairs has on the government’s ability to govern.

Keywords

coalitions – Iraq – Morocco – patronage – political parties
Introduction*

This article analyses the dynamics of post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation in the cases of Iraq and Morocco.¹ The two countries have been selected as they, despite widely different political contexts,² highlight how elite bargaining and coalition formation in the MENA region is often far removed from election results and, instead, rooted in competition over access to patronage resources and power competition. This dynamic is noteworthy in that it stands in contrast to findings derived from the Western cases that dominate the literature and is therefore contrary to what we would expect to find.³ Hence, the findings of the article make a contribution to the broader literature on post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation by drawing out lessons from the under-studied Global South. Recent works on political parties in the MENA have alluded to this state of affairs but, so far, the scholarship is missing in-depth comparative studies of the intricate dynamics of elite bargaining and coalition formation.⁴ Beyond the reality that post-election

* The authors would like to thank Hendrik Kraetzschmar, Francesco Cavatorta, and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

¹ We define elites along the lines of Perthes (2004), who includes the business elite, politicians and members of the religious establishment along with provincial notability and prominent regime loyalists, i.e., a crossroads of economics and politics. See Volker Perthes, ed., Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004.

² Iraq is a semi-federal republic with a pre-2003 history of one-party politics, while Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with a tradition of multiparty politics. While Iraq is plagued by sectarianism (ethnic and religious), Morocco is generally viewed as homogenous, despite the existence of a cleavage between those who identify as Berber and those who do not, regardless of their heritage.


elite bargaining and coalition formation in Iraq and Morocco do not represent the wishes of the voters, but rather reflect political clientelism and inter-party patronage (Iraq) and regime survival tactics (Morocco), our comparison demonstrates the negative impact that such a government formation has on the government’s term in office. Building on the macro analysis of coalition governance in the Arab MENA, as well as the theoretical underpinnings as developed by Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta in this special issue, this article zooms in on, and offers an understanding of, the characteristics of coalition formation and governance in Iraq and Morocco, laying out the formation process and its implications for governance.

Beginning with the Moroccan case, the analysis focuses on the dynamics of elite bargaining and coalition formation in the post-independence era. It illustrates how, despite constitutional provisions and changes therein, neither the process of government and cabinet formation nor the outcome, i.e., pro-monarchy institutions, have changed over the years, although the composition of coalition governments and cabinets has varied. The analysis finds that the main factor driving elite bargaining and coalition formation in present-day Morocco remains the king, both directly and indirectly. Thus, the political parties – and individual politicians in particular – principally focus their efforts on ingratiating themselves with the monarch in what can best be characterized as office-seeking behaviour, whilst downplaying vote-seeking and policy-seeking behaviour. This reality has assisted in the continuous weakening of the political parties, the co-optation of the opposition, the perpetuation of personalistic politics and, ultimately, the survival of the executive monarchy, in which the king not only rules, but also governs.

In Iraq, the focus is on the post-2003 (or more specifically following the new constitution in 2005) political order, where an ethnosectarian-based system of power sharing, known as Muhasasa Ta’ifia (sectarian apportionment), and a highly fractionalised party landscape, leads to the need for coalition formation. However, as the system is voluntary in nature, an elite bargaining


5 Supporting each other in exchange for share of resources.

6 Here ‘government’ refers to the coalition of political parties, whilst ‘cabinet’ covers ministers, which are not necessarily affiliated with a political party. A coalition is defined as a type of government formed jointly by two or more parties where, following an election, a single party is unable to muster a working parliamentary majority of its own. For more detail, please refer to the article by Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta in this Special Issue.

process is needed in order to form a government. Not only does this result in severe delays in the formation of a new government (of up to a year), it has also resulted in the leader of political party/alliance that won the most seats in the election ultimately not becoming the prime minister (PM) in each election since the new constitution was drafted. Rather than an individual driving the process forward, like the king in Morocco, it is the Muhasasa Ta’ifia system itself that ensures the division of resources amongst the political parties. Regardless of the election outcome and who is elected PM, there has been a division of political power, and the wealth that goes with it, which in turn has been divided amongst their patronage system. As a result, political parties are more reliant on each other and the deals they can strike for themselves and their patronage networks than they are to the electorate, which bears some similarities to Morocco. In the Iraqi case study, this article focuses on the negative impact that elite bargaining in coalition formation has on governance and how it encourages a political system based on patronage, whilst preventing successive governments from formulating policies to tackle the significant issues Iraq is facing today.

The subsequent section examines the dynamics of post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation in Morocco, before moving on to the analysis of the Iraqi case. This is followed by a comparative concluding analysis of the two cases, centring on the issue of how such coalition bargaining affects and relates to patronage, governance, and the role of elections.

Morocco: Elite Bargaining and Coalition Formation as Royal Tools

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy in which the king plays a pivotal role in political life. That said, unlike Iraq and most of the other MENA states that have experienced prolonged periods of one-party rule until the spread of competitive authoritarianism across the region from the mid-1990s onwards, Morocco has a long tradition of multiparty politics and coalition governments dating back to the early post-independence period of the late 1950s. Hence, in contrast to the majority of the other authoritarian MENA regimes, which have tended to pursue a more overtly repressive survival strategy, the Moroccan

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monarch has sought to create division within the party system, splitting not only the opposition, but also the monarchy’s agents and supporters, i.e., the so-called makhzen – or regime – parties. Consequently, as depicted in table 1, in the post-independence period, elite negotiations and the process of coalition formation have played a central role in Moroccan politics. However, unlike in democratic regimes, where such bargaining takes place between elected actors, habitually with party affiliation, in Morocco, the central figure has always been the monarch and intra-party negotiations are of secondary importance and usually take place after the government has been formed.

The different strands of literature on opposition cooperation in the MENA tends to view engagement and alliances between the different political parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Characteristics of the Moroccan governments, 1955–2021</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% (no.) Coalition governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of all governments</td>
<td>74% (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-election</td>
<td>38% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reshuffles</td>
<td>62% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party-affiliated PM</td>
<td>38% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarch = PM</td>
<td>19% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technocrat PM</td>
<td>23% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-party affiliated PM</td>
<td>15% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM from independence movement</td>
<td>4% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


as being either tactical, strategic, or sustained, i.e., on a spectrum stretching from a low level of cooperation to a high level of cooperation. Recent research in the field has explored further facets of opposition cooperation, resulting in the formulation of a new typology, which emphasizes the number of issues (single versus multiple) on which actors cooperate and the nature of the coalitions (domestic only versus foreign and domestic collaborations), rather than focusing on cooperation goals and durability. The Moroccan case in some ways extends this latter branch of research by adding an outlier perspective in the sense that the parameters within which parties cooperate are so distinct, not only in terms of the opposition parties, but also those that are affiliated to the regime. In Morocco, ideology is not one of the main factors shaping party cooperation, coalition formation, and elite bargaining, at least not if we define ideology along the traditional left-right continuum. In the Moroccan case, ideology in this sense can best be characterized as a sub-factor, which is important in the wake of government formation, while the dominant factor shaping post-election elite bargaining and cooperation with government formation in mind is a party’s position on, and relationship with, the monarchy. While one could argue that this constitutes ideology to some degree, it goes much deeper than that in Morocco. A party’s relationship with the monarchy cannot simply be reduced to a political standpoint, but rather traces back to that party’s origins; it is a part of its fabric.

13 Please note that the article focuses exclusively on the national level in line with the rest of the special issue. However, it is worth noting that in the case of Morocco, local elections are perhaps even more important than national elections in the eyes of the electorate as votes translate more directly into power at this level. As a consequence, elite bargaining and coalition games take different forms at the national and local level. For more on this, please see Matt Buehler, Why Alliances Fail: Islamist and Leftist Coalitions in North Africa. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018; Janine Clark, Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018; Sylvia Bergh, The Politics of Development in Morocco: Local Governance and Political Participation in North Africa. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.
The Moroccan Party Landscape

The Moroccan monarch has played a fundamental role in shaping the country’s party system in the post-independence era. However, unlike the norm, particularly in the MENA, the ruler (in this case the monarch) did not seek to establish a one-party state, nor did the ruler’s involvement in party politics cease once a political system had been institutionalized. Rather, with a view to weaken its political rivals, the monarchy has encouraged and actively supported the formation, splintering, and legalization of a swathe of parties over the last seven decades.15

During the first few decades post-independence, the emphasis was primarily on the formation and licensing of parties ideologically proximate to the monarchy and on sowing seeds of division within the opposition parties, ultimately leading these to splinter and thus weaken.16 The result was the emergence of a multiparty system composed of two camps: the opposition parties (at times referred to as the Kutla) pitted against the regime vehicles.17 From the late 1970s onwards, the strategy of encouraging division was also employed within the regime camp, not in the form of party splinters, but rather the formation of new parties, which would have to compete against each other for the monarch’s affection.18 Although these various parties made the pretence of having an ideological underpinning, labelling themselves as liberal, conservative, etc., what really distinguished the parties was whether they originated from within the independence movement (opposition parties) or were established directly by, or by forces loyal to, the monarchy (regime parties).19


16 In line with this strategy, King Mohammed V and his successor, King Hassan II, encouraged the activities of the Parti de la Choura (PDI), which represented rural notables; pushed through the accreditation of the rural, Berber-oriented Mouvement Populaire (MP) in 1958; supported the splinter by a faction of the influential Parti Istiqlal (PI) and the subsequent formation of the Union National des Forces Populaires (UNFP) in 1959; and oversaw the establishment of the Front pour la Défense des Institutions Constitutionnelles (FDIC) in 1963. See Clark, Local Politics.

17 Storm, Democratization.

18 Hence, the formation of the Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI) by the king’s brother-in-law, Ahmed Osman, in 1978, and its counterweight, the slightly more conservative Union Constitutionnelle (UC), in 1983. See Storm, Party Politics.

The paramount importance of how the Moroccan party system emerged and developed over the years cannot be stressed enough when one assesses post-election elite negotiations and coalition bargaining. The characteristics of the party system and its individual components resulted not only in the creation of two political blocs and a heavily fragmented party landscape. A further outcome was the formation of a multitude of political parties, which had very limited ideological underpinnings and only feeble roots in society due to the reality that most of these were internally created, i.e., pieced together around a known political figure by members of the political establishment already serving in parliament.\textsuperscript{20} As a consequence of this reality, when the monarch initiated elite negotiations with a view to form a governing coalition and cabinet – as per his constitutionally prescribed prerogatives – he negotiated directly with individual politicians. Many of these were technocrats with no party affiliation or previous political experience, others were affiliated with parties that formed part of the governing coalition, but in several instances individual politicians accepted cabinet portfolios despite their parties not forming part of the governing coalition.\textsuperscript{21} This was possible because it was common knowledge that a politician’s failure to adhere to party lines vis-à-vis the monarchy did not equate to the end of that politician’s political career, even in the event of the person’s expulsion from the party, but rather the opposite as power and political fortune originated with the monarchy.

This ability to entice individual politicians to breach party lines for personal gain provided the monarchy with another means to weaken potential political rivals. Thus, post-election elite bargaining in relation to coalition and cabinet negotiations became a tool with which to reward loyalty, curb ambition, and exercise monarchical control via co-optation, rather than the formation of political alliances and fostering cooperation amongst parties with a view to achieve objectives rooted in ideology and interests.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Storm, \textit{Party Politics}.
\textsuperscript{21} One illustration of this was the appointment of Abdelhadi Boutaleb as a cabinet minister in the first government of Hassan II (1961), despite the UNFP not being a member of the governing coalition. Other examples include Mohamed Bahnine (\textit{PI}), Maâti Bouabid (\textit{UNFP}), and Azzedine Laraki (\textit{PI}) accepting the king’s invitation to take on the position of prime minister, despite their parties neither winning the elections nor being members of the governing coalition. Storm, \textit{Democratization}.
Reliance on Technocrats and Broad Coalitions

Over the years, even as the monarch’s constitutionally enshrined prerogatives in relation to government and cabinet formation have decreased, the related process and outcomes of such have not fundamentally altered. Formally, until the adoption of the constitution of 1992, i.e., a period spanning thirty years and covering four legislative elections (1963, 1970, 1977 and 1984) as well as the formation of 15 cabinets, the monarch was endowed with extensive direct political powers in relation to government and cabinet formation: he was the head of state, he could initiate legislation, he was in charge of coalition and cabinet negotiations, appointed the prime minister and other cabinet members, and he was not bound to include representation from the political parties. As a consequence of these wide-ranging powers, the monarch used the process of government and cabinet formation as a means to ensure the monarchy’s survival, its pivotal role in politics, and the protection of its interests.

During the 1960s, there was considerable representation from the political parties, both in the various cabinets and governments, but following political unrest, the declaration of the state of emergency (1965–1970), and two unsuccessful coup attempts in 1971 and 1972, the monarch came to increasingly rely on technocrats from within the regime. Hence, the cabinets of Lamrani I (1971–1972), Lamrani II (1972), and Osman I (1972–1977) were composed solely of technocrats, whilst Osman II (1977–1979) had a majority of technocrats as well as party representation from the MP, the PI, and eventually the RNI upon its creation in 1978. Coordinated opposition to the regime by the PI and the UNFP in the Kutla al-Wataniya alliance shook the monarchy following the 1977 elections. This resulted in a policy shift in the late 1970s, which saw the monarch invite a plethora of parties from both blocs to play a role in government, although the cabinets remained headed and dominated by technocrats. As intended, there was consequently disaccord within the various governments as well as between the government coalitions and the cabinets serving concurrently, and it was therefore difficult for these to reach agreement on policy. At times of hiatus, the monarch stepped in and showed himself to be a political primus motor that could always be relied on to deliver, thereby strengthening his political legitimacy amongst the population – in this respect, the monarch’s behaviour can be characterized as akin to vote-seeking. He makes a point of appealing to the citizenry as opposed to the political parties and, furthermore, courts the citizenry to a greater extent than the parties do.

23 Storm, Democratization; Willis, “Political Parties: Illusion”; Willis, “Political Parties: Ideology.”
**Institutionalization as a Negative Force**

Understanding the dynamics of the Moroccan political system and the process of government and cabinet formation during the first three decades post-independence is crucial for comprehending subsequent negotiations and bargaining, because while the constitution was revised and the monarch’s powers formally reduced in this respect, the process of government and cabinet formation had been informally institutionalized. For example, new constitutional provisions were introduced in 1992 that bound the monarch formally vis-à-vis the prime minister, whom the monarch was obliged to consult with when appointing the cabinet. Moreover revised clauses were adopted in the constitution of 2011, which saw the monarch forced to appoint a prime minister from the party winning the legislative elections (thus guaranteeing party involvement). Nevertheless, practice remained the same. The monarch negotiated directly with individuals, he used the process to reward loyalty, to keep ambitious potential rivals in check, to divide the opposition and the regime wings internally, to sow strife within parties, to co-opt new actors with a view to serve the monarchy’s interests, and encouraged the formation of new parties post-election, whilst the prime minister was side-lined and kept quiet.24

Perhaps the strongest example of how the process and outcome of post-election coalition government and cabinet negotiations have remained largely unchanged in practice, despite changes to the formal procedures, was the appointment of the government and cabinet headed by the PJD’s Saad Eddine el-Othmani in 2017, following their victory in the legislative elections of October 2016. At the time of his appointment to the post of prime minister, el-Othmani was not the leader of the PJD. Rather, the party was headed by the enormously popular Abdelilah Benkirane, who had a broad appeal beyond traditional PJD supporters and had led the party not only to victory in the elections, but also substantially increased mandates to just shy of 30 percent. Benkirane was accordingly viewed as a potential threat to the political status quo, and as a consequence – given the monarchy’s central role in politics – several ambitious party leaders (including the leaders of the PI, the RNI, and the PAM) point-blank refused to participate in a coalition led by Benkirane, although they were not against working with the PJD in principle.25

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24 Examples include the creation of the PJD in 1998 with a view to co-opt the Islamist segment, and the formation of the Parti Authenticité et Modernité (PAM) by the king’s close school friend Fouad Ali al-Himma in 2008 as some elements of the regime were beginning to fall out of line and the PI was growing too strong.

With negotiations between the monarch, Benkirane, and the political parties dragging out, the monarch took the debatable step of excusing Benkirane and appointing his leadership rival, el-Othmani, thereby causing a deep rift within the party. Less than two weeks later, on 25 March 2017, el-Othmani announced that he would be forming a coalition with the RNI, the MP, the UC, the PPS, and the USFP, and the full list of cabinet members—dominated by technocrats—was announced on 5 April 2017.²⁶ The monarchy had yet again neutralized an opponent via a skilled game of coalition bargaining and elite negotiations.

What might at first appear to be a mere footnote in Moroccan politics had fundamental repercussions for the 8 September 2021 elections and subsequent government formation. El-Othmani effectively undermined the PJD’s credentials as an independent force by accepting the monarchy’s offer, including the necessity of bringing the RNI into the coalition along with the USFP, whilst excluding the more ideologically proximate PI on the RNI’s request. In so doing, he also simultaneously facilitated the return of the RNI as chief regime party under its new leader, Aziz Akhannouch, a powerful figure within government circles and the rural/agricultural sector.²⁷ As predicted by most observers, the RNI grew in strength over the following years, and by the time the 2021 elections took place, the party demonstrated remarkable progress at the polls, increasing its seat share from 9.4 per cent in 2016 to 25.8 per cent in 2021, whilst the PJD lost almost 90 per cent of its seats, dropping from 31.6 per cent in 2016 to 3.3 per cent in 2021.²⁸

As already mentioned, the PJD’s setback was partially rooted in divisions within the party, which were publicly laid bare in the aftermath of the coalition negotiations following the 2016 elections. However, the party was also punished by the electorate for what many saw as poor performance in office

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²⁸ See www.elections.ma.
and, more importantly, by reforms to the election code in 2021, which introduced a move away from calculating the allocation of seats on the basis of valid votes cast to a measure instead emphasizing registered voters. This election reform, coupled with the holding of municipal and regional elections consecutively and an intensive drive by the Ministry of the Interior to register voters in the rural areas of the country that are typically regime party strongholds, were the most important factors in the electoral demise of the PJD and the simultaneous electoral success of the RNIS and the PAM.

Because of the RNIS’s overwhelming victory, coalition bargaining and the cabinet formation process in the aftermath of the elections were a relatively swift process by Moroccan standards, lasting less than two weeks and centring primarily on which two parties would be sharing government power with the RNIS. The most likely outcome was thought to be an alliance with the PI and the USFP, both of which performed well in the elections, rather than an alliance with the PAM and a third party, given the PAM’s status as a rival of the RNIS, the lack of an obvious third party choice, and the PAM’s recent courting of the PJD. In the end, in a move that surprised many, Akhannouch invited both the PAM and the PI to join government, an offer that the PAM swiftly accepted on 17 September 2021, leaving the PI without much time to strategize as the party ran the risk of the spot going to another more amenable party. Hence, on 22 September 2021, 12 days after being tasked with forming a government, Akhannouch announced that he had reached an agreement with the PAM and the PI, forming what was an ideologically very proximate government and thus another break with Moroccan political tradition.

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32 It is worth noting that the RNIS and the PAM both took 7 cabinet portfolios, whilst the PI received 4. A further 7 went to technocrats. This is interesting given the superior performance of the RNIS, and thus the division of portfolios points in the direction that they remain determined by the monarch.
Iraq: Elite Bargaining and the Division of Resources

Since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the country has transformed from an authoritarian dictatorship to a power-sharing ‘democracy,’ which was cemented under the new constitution (and the process that led to its creation) in 2005. More or less every four years, the country has gone to the polls and elected a new parliament. Despite this new democratic process, since the introduction of the new constitution, no leader of the political party/alliance that won the most seats in the election has ever gone on to become the PM (see table 2). This phenomenon was initially due to the process of elite bargaining relying on candidates who were best placed to rally sufficient support from parliamentary parties and blocs rather than who won the most seats (with failure to gain support leading to a compromise candidate from within the bloc). However, more recently, the lack of clear winners has led to the emergence of independent consensus candidates. Elite bargaining in the context of coalition formation in Iraq is widely seen as revolving around a division of the country’s resources and wealth amongst the political elites, rather than the formation of a government based on an agreed-upon policy agenda. It can be argued that the political system reliant on this form of elite bargaining is largely responsible for the failure to address the prevailing issues in the country.

Although the 2005 constitution cemented consociational power-sharing in Iraq, it is distinctly lacking in developing formal mechanisms that institutionalise the sharing of power. Rather, the formation of a coalition/power-sharing government in Iraq remains informal and based on the precedent set by the formation of the first government in 2005. The current party landscape in Iraq is heavily influenced by this informal power-sharing agreement based on ethnosectarian identity. Because of this influence, political parties largely represent sectarian identities, even though much of the population opposes this method of politics, as is evident from the 2019 anti-government protests that carried a distinctly anti-sectarian flavour. Under the informal power-sharing system, the expectation is that the Speaker for the Council of Representatives is a Sunni, the President a Kurd, and the PM a Shi’a, all of whom are elected by parliament before the formation of the actual government, and in this order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Winner*</th>
<th>Coalition formation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Nouri al-Maliki</td>
<td>Ibrahim al-Jafaari</td>
<td>The United Iraqi Alliance won the most seats and put forth Jafaari as its candidate, however, when Kurds and Sunnis rejected him a compromise candidate of Maliki (Jafaari’s deputy) was put forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Nouri al-Maliki</td>
<td>Ayad Allawi</td>
<td>Although Allawi’s alliance won the most seats in the election, Maliki manoeuvred around him by forming a larger post-election alliance, which the Iraqi Chief Justice ruled in favour of after referral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Haider al-Abadi</td>
<td>Nouri al-Maliki</td>
<td>Maliki won the 2014 elections, but his marginalisation of others paired with the rise of IS meant he could not garner enough support to form a government. He also lost international support, which was needed in the fight against the Islamic State. Eventually Maliki was forced to resign and his party put forward his deputy, Abadi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Adil Abdul-Mahdi</td>
<td>Muqtada al-Sadr</td>
<td>The 2018 elections had record low turnout and no clear winner, which created much political competition and back and forth in the formation of alliances. Ultimately this led to the nomination of an independent candidate accepted by all parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Mustafa al-Kadhimi</td>
<td>Muqtada al-Sadr</td>
<td>Following the 2019 protests in Iraq Mahdi was forced to resign. This time a compromise candidate had to satisfy both the political parties and the protest movement, which eventually led to the Kadhimi becoming PM.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This said, negotiations for the formation of the coalition government tend to run in parallel to the inter-party/alliance jostling that goes on for the allocation of these posts. The PM then forms a coalition cabinet that traditionally includes all major parliamentary blocs (in the 2021 elections an opposition has emerged for the first time).35 This is a lengthy process, with multiple back and forth negotiations, promises, and counter promises between different sets of political parties/party alliances. In terms of post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation, this takes three inter-linked stages in Iraq that have different levels of importance based on the agreements reached in each stage: the formation of post-election blocs, the election of the speaker, president and PM, and finally the election of the coalition cabinet (including positions within cabinet).

Firstly, parliamentary blocs can be formed post-election. Parties, or pre-election electoral alliances, can come together post-election to strengthen their (bargaining) position in the government formation process. The objective is to form the largest parliamentary bloc to then be tasked with forming the government and selecting the PM, whilst for smaller parties the objective is to join the winning bloc early on in order to be in a better position to negotiate positions within the ministries and other benefits. These negotiations are

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Mohammed Shia al-Sudani</td>
<td>Muqtada al-Sadr</td>
<td>Yet again the 2021 elections had record low turnout and no clear winner. After over a year of political deadlock al-Sudani was elected PM by the largest political bloc after Sadr, and his 79 lawmakers withdrew completely from the parliament.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This refers to the leader of winning alliance or candidate selected by winning alliance.

generally based on benefiting the political party and elites rather than aligning on policy. A good example of this are the 2010 elections,\textsuperscript{36} where there was strong competition between the State of Law coalition (89 seats) and al-Iraqiya (91 seats) to form a government. The Kurdish parties in parliament formed a post-election bloc of 57 seats (although Gorran later withdrew, reducing the bloc to 49 seats) and made a list of 19 demands to be met for them to join the new government. Similarly, State of Law also formed a post-election bloc with the Iraqi National Alliance, who both wanted to prevent al-Iraqiya, who won the most seats, from heading the new government and from choosing the next PM. This allowed State of Law to form the new government, despite not winning the election and post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation was key to its success and political manoeuvring (rather than votes or polices) were instrumental.\textsuperscript{37}

In the 2018 government formation process, two competing Shi'a blocs emerged – Bina (\textit{Tahalof al-Binaa'\textsuperscript{3}}), led by al-Maliki, and Islah, (\textit{Tahalof al-Islah wal-\textasciitilde{um}ar\textsuperscript{3}}), led by Muqtada al Sadr. Although Sadr was initially more successful in building his parliamentary bloc, Maliki began winning over other political parties/alliances by offering them ministerial positions and other government portfolios. The result of this bargaining was that both blocs ended up making contradictory claims as to their respective numbers in parliament. This issue then went to parliament as there was a disagreement over whether the bloc leader controls all the seats, or if MPs can move between blocs. Parliament referred the question to the country’s Supreme Court, which, instead of offering a judgement, sent the matter back to parliament, where it remained unresolved. As a result, neither bloc was able to form a new coalition government. Eventually Sadr and Hadi al-Ameri (who formed part of the Bina bloc) reached an agreement, based on who should not be elected PM, rather than who should, that would allow for a government to be formed based on equal distribution of positions between the two blocs.\textsuperscript{38} Again, elite bargaining and coalition formation heavily influenced the political process and the votes gained by political actors became secondary in deciding the government. More

\textsuperscript{36} The 2010 government formation process also set a precedent that the largest bloc who can form the government can be formed after the elections following a ruling from the Iraqi Chief Justice.


importantly, it illustrates that in Iraq, power and positions, rather than policy and a shared political agenda, drive the process.

In a second phase, which runs alongside the formation of post-election blocs, the parliament elects its Speaker, the president of the republic and the PM. Negotiations begin – both within and between blocs – with the nomination and election of each candidate. This often leads to the candidates who are more politically acceptable across parliament (or better at negotiating), rather than those most suitable for the position. In practice, this has resulted in the winning party (most seats won in election) either not naming the new PM or having to put forward a compromise candidate. Traditionally, the Sunni political parties negotiate amongst themselves for the candidate that they put forward for the role of the Speaker, and the Kurdish political parties do the same for the presidency. In the 2018 election, for instance, there was no clear winner and, as a result, there was much competition over the formation of government. Both the post-election Bina and Islah blocs put forward their own candidates for Speaker and, as a result, neither were ratified by parliament. It was only following the agreement between Sadr and Ameri that the candidates were put to a vote in parliament, with Bina’s candidate, Mohammed al-Halbousi, winning. Although the Kurds originally had a deal where the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is from the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the President of Iraq is selected from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), internal disagreements led to them both putting forward a candidate in 2018. The PUK and its candidate, Dr. Barham Salih, were generally more popular with political actors in Baghdad and thus he won the majority vote in parliament. The deal between Ameri and Sadr led to Adil Abdul-Mahdi becoming PM-designate and tasked with forming a new coalition government. Mahdi was a compromise candidate who was acceptable to all negotiating parties. Thus, the fact that there was no clear winner in the 2018 elections and the failure to form a recognised largest bloc resulted in the election of a weak PM, with no real political base, and ultimately lacking a mandate to govern, as he lacked the political strength to manage the members of his coalition government.

In the third and final phase, the PM-designate is tasked with forming a government, which involves not only deciding on the allocation of ministries, but also their deputies and senior civil service staff within the ministries, which is where the Muhasasa Ta’ifia system ensures that every member party ultimately gets their share. Although positions are allocated on the basis of the

39 Ibid.
parliamentary strength of a political party/alliance or bloc, as these blocs are often formed after the elections, they also involve deals on positions.40 Once negotiated, these positions then also have to be accepted by parliament. The formation of the government begins with the formation of the largest bloc and the selection of the Speaker, President, and PM, as deals are made along the way. Negotiations focus on power and not policy. Thus, from the first phase, political parties try to manoeuvre themselves into the best position, which often means aligning with parties with completely different agendas.

The formation of governments in Iraq is thus a lengthy process and can take several months. Moreover, the PM is dependent on appeasing the parties that prop them up, which can create weak (in terms of formulating and implementing policy) coalition governments, particularly when the seats are divided between too many blocs. In 2018 competition between the Bina and Islah, and within Bina (Islah wanted technocrats elected), meant that PM Mahdi was initially only able to form a government with 14 out of 22 ministers approved.41 Similarly, in the 2010 government formation cycle, PM Maliki had to “temporarily” take on the posts of Minister of Defence, Interior, and National Security, alongside his position as PM, until “acceptable” candidates could be found.42 Thus, the government can be formed, without the cabinet being fully appointed and this last elite bargaining phase can carry on into the government’s term.

**The Impact of Post-Election Elite Bargaining and Coalition Formation**

Post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation has a significant impact in Iraq. In Iraqi elections there are no winners or losers, some politicians/political parties/alliances just win more. As highlighted above, the informal agreement on government formation that has existed since 2005 is based on dividing the “spoils,” which includes ministries and their budgets, civil service positions, and government contracts.43 This has made many citizens question

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41 Mansour, “Iraq’s 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction between Reform and the Status Quo.”
42 O’Driscoll, “Autonomy Impaired: Centralisation, Authoritarianism and the Failing Iraqi State.”
the election process, and in 2018 voter turnout was a record low, only to be beaten again in 2021 with even fewer citizens willing to cast their vote. There is a sense amongst much of the population that the government is not elected by the people, but rather created based on backroom deals hatched post-elections by the country’s political elites, which has led to voter apathy, protest, and a breakdown of the social contract. However, beyond this rupture between the population and the political elites, a system based on post-election elite bargaining in Iraq hinders good governance, drives corruption, and creates/sustains inequality. This is due to post-election elite bargaining in Iraq mainly focusing on gaining political positions and the division of the ‘spoils’ amongst elites and their patronage network.

Furthermore, the process of post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation in Iraq is a time-consuming one and it can take over a year to form a new government (as it did following the 2021 elections). As a result, this leaves the country with a period of uncertainty, limits effective governance, and also reduces the period of time the government has to affect change before the next election. Additionally, as both bloc formation and elite bargaining are centred on political elites maximising their own power and rewards, the government that is formed often lacks a clear political agenda on which to govern. This hinders quick progress in governance in a government that has already lost time through its formation. It also leads to disagreements and tension within the government, as members of the coalition government often have incompatible agendas, thus further hindering good governance. Finally, it limits the ability of new political parties that represent the population from emerging, as you need to be part of the system to get into the government.

As already highlighted, the government formation process is based on dividing the country’s resources between political actors, which systematically facilitates corruption and clientelism. Firstly, the division of public sector

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44 Mansour, “Iraq’s 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction between Reform and the Status Quo.”
46 O’Driscoll et al., “Reimagining the Social Contract in Iraq.”
48 Although this article does not analyse the October 2021 elections as the elite bargaining process is still ongoing, it must be noted that 9 seats were won by Imtidad Movement, a new political party that emerged from the protest movement.
employment based on the success of the elite bargaining process leads to a bloated, often unqualified and highly unproductive public sector that forms part of a clientelist network for political parties.\textsuperscript{50} Secondly, finances are wasted in dividing them between all of the political actors in each sector, with the division of power extending to the division of finances.\textsuperscript{51} Thirdly, this division of finances allows political parties to use state resources independent of the state and can thus be used to buy votes and extend clientelist networks, which in turn undermines the state, despite the finances originating from it.\textsuperscript{52} Fourthly, it can also lead to certain sectors being overfunded due to the strong political position of those in charge, one example being the significant funds directed to the Popular Mobilisation Forces,\textsuperscript{53} given the political success of the political actors connected to it in the 2018 elections.\textsuperscript{54}

What the above does is create, and further, inequalities in Iraq. Political actors often act for their base rather than the whole population, bearing strong similarities to Lebanon, which has a similar consociational political system.\textsuperscript{55} The provision of basic services is often dependent on the patronage system or the financial resources to obtain them privately.\textsuperscript{56} The price of oil continuously fluctuates, whilst the size of the population has rapidly increased, creating a young population that does not receive benefits from the system. Thus, for much of the population the political system, based on post-election elite bargaining and coalition/bloc formation, does not work. The polarisation that politicians push for their own benefit does not connect to the majority of the population, and as a result protest is increasingly perceived as a more effective means of political participation than elections for much of the population.\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{Bourhrous2019} Bourhrous et al., “Reform within the System: Governance in Iraq and Lebanon.”
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Concluding Comparative Analysis

The two case studies explored here have outlined the dynamics that govern elite negotiations and coalition formation in Iraq and Morocco. While these dynamics differ between the two cases, they have both produced the same overall outcome: coalition governments and cabinets that are not anchored in the results of legislative elections. From a more granular perspective, however, the two cases differ. In Iraq, post-election coalition governments and cabinets are the result of political clientelism and inter-party patronage, where parties are willing to support each other in exchange for the division of resources and the maintenance of the status quo, whilst in Morocco they are a product of power games with the view to ensure the survival of the executive monarchy. The analysis thus illustrates the important point that while there has been a tendency to see the MENA as a monolithic group of elitist, authoritarian regimes, there is a wide variety of factors that not only influence coalition formation, but also their effects. Moreover, the drivers of coalition bargaining can be very different in the two countries, despite both regimes featuring coalition governments.

Beginning with the issue of patronage, this is a factor that has played – and continues to play – a much more central role in Iraq compared to Morocco. In Iraq the entire electoral process is based on clientelism and patronage. Post-election elite-bargaining is very much centred on the division of resources, including wealth and public sector positions. This in turn enables political elites to circumvent the state and set up strong patronage networks, which last throughout the term of government. In Iraq, in fact, political cooperation centres on the dispensation of patronage, which, as a result, make post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation more important than the elections themselves. However, patronage does feed into the elections as well, as it enables political elites to promise benefits in exchange for votes.58 While patronage plays a role in elite bargaining and the process of coalition formation in Morocco, it is not one of the most central factors shaping the outcome of coalition talks. Years of multiparty politics coupled with proportional representation has led to broad-based coalition governments and fragmented cabinets, which have made it difficult for individual politicians to disperse state resources in comparison to not only Iraq, but also other MENA states, such as e.g., Egypt and Jordan.59 In Morocco, patronage emanates from the

58 Dodge and Mansour, “Politically Sanctioned Corruption and Barriers to Reform in Iraq.”
monarchy, and the political parties, individual parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are therefore only able to distribute state resources to the extent that such expenditures fit with the agenda of the monarchy, which is very much focused on neutralizing potential rivals and quelling dissent and discontent. Consequently, patronage networks in this sense are difficult for individual politicians to manage as they are unstable, in line with the shifting foci of the monarchy, with e.g., women's advocacy groups being benefactors in the late 1990s and early 2000s, only to see the support diverted to Berber advocacy groups, and most recently the rise in popularity of youth advocacy groups following the Arab Uprisings.

In terms of government formation, there are also similarities between Iraq and Morocco. In Iraq, government formation is largely dependent on post-election elite bargaining and bloc formation. Although the election results do play a role, it is more in terms of creating a basis for the bargaining position and political manoeuvring that then plays a central role in the formation of the new government. Thus, for much of the Iraqi population, the elections have become futile and are not seen to influence the formation of a new government and its policies. This sentiment amongst the electorate is echoed in Morocco, where voter turnout in legislative elections remains low at less than 40 per cent of the voting age population. This is perhaps not surprising given that beyond choosing the party from which the monarch will select the prime minister post-2011, the Moroccan voter has very little say.

In Morocco, the election results are of even less importance than Iraq. The governing coalition, regardless of the outcome of the vote, tends to include a broad range of parties from both the traditional opposition and the regime – often with the inclusion of more parties than technically needed in order to obtain a simple majority in parliament. Therefore, the Moroccan governments are habitually fragmented and polarized, they are not brought together by ideology and policy preferences, i.e., shared objectives, and thus it is difficult to reach consensus on policy matters. Hence, government programmes tend to be weak and difficult to implement, leaving the monarch room to shine as the

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61 Mansour, “Iraq’s 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction between Reform and the Status Quo.”

decisive father figure in politics. While the institutional set-up in Iraq is different to that in Morocco, the former being a republic and the latter a monarchy, the consequences of the process of elite bargaining and coalition formation are very similar. In Iraq, this process is so focused on the distribution of positions and resources, as well as the maintenance of the status quo, that it comes at the cost of governance. Negotiations do not involve decisions over policy and therefore governments are created without a common agenda. Thus, in Iraq, post-election elite bargaining and coalition formation can be seen to have severe negative impacts on governance and decision-making, which in turn has a negative impact on the population, as many of their grievances are not addressed through the resulting political system.63

63 O’Driscoll et al., “Reimagining the Social Contract in Iraq.”