



Vote Officials Move to Let Expatriates Cast Ballots

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BAGHDAD, Iraq -- Iraqi election officials say they have hired a Geneva-based organization to set up polls for Iraqi expatriates in at least 14 countries for the coming elections.

The group in charge of the expatriate polling, the International Organization for Migration, has done similar projects for recent elections in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and Afghanistan. It has ties to the United Nations, which is helping to set up the elections here.

"They have good experience with this," said Adel al-Lami, an organizer in the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, which is overseeing the election process. "They helped out in Afghanistan. We have to depend on them. It's the least we can do. We can't do it on our own."

The agreement with the International Organization for Migration was reached after the electoral commission announced on Nov. 4 its decision to allow expatriates to vote in the elections, which are scheduled for the end of January. It decided after weeks of anguished debate during which powerful political groups, especially the major Shiite parties, lobbied the commission to include the expatriates.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most powerful Shiite cleric in Iraq, had also urged expatriate participation. Most Iraqi expatriates are believed to be Shiites who fled the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Arab who persecuted people of other religious sects and ethnicities. Expatriate participation could also benefit Iraq's Kurdish parties and groups that spent years in exile.

The United Nations and United States had opposed the move, arguing that setting up out-of-country polling would be difficult and expensive and that it could open the elections to charges of fraud and illegitimacy.

However, Carlos Valenzuela, the leader of the United Nation's electoral advisory team here, said in an interview at the time that the International Organization for Migration would be a likely candidate to organize expatriate voting if the electoral commission allowed it.

Mr. Valenzuela estimated that two million to four million Iraqis live abroad, and that about half are over the age of 18, which would make them eligible to vote.

Mr. Lami said the 14 countries initially chosen for expatriate voting are those with the largest populations of Iraqis. More could be added, he said.

The countries are the United States, Britain, Iran, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Canada and Australia.

Mr. Lami said the commission is trying to secure enough money for expatriate polling. One Western diplomat estimated that the process would cost millions of dollars, and Mr. Valenzuela said out-of-country voting costs much more per person than in-country voting. Mr. Lami said the money would come from the interim Iraqi government and from outside donors.

One huge logistical question is where in the 14 or more countries to vote. Mr. Lami first suggested that Iraqi embassies and United Nations offices could provide space, but later said the embassies would not be voting sites and would play only a supporting role.

Mr. Valenzuela opposed having the embassies involved at all, saying the Iraqi government was a political entity and that its involvement could taint the outcome. He added that the United Nations had no mandate to help carry out expatriate voting for the Iraqis.

In recent elections, such as those in East Timor and Afghanistan, expatriate voting was allowed, but only in a few countries, he said. The decision to allow expatriates to vote was criticized by some Sunnis here, including officials of the Muslim Scholars Association, a group of Sunni clerics that says it represents 3,000 mosques. The group has called for a boycott of the elections to protest the American assault on Falluja.

By Edward Wong
New York Times

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