



Iraqi American Christians Censure Voting Program

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Tens of thousands of Iraqi Americans in areas distant from Los Angeles may not be able to vote in the first Iraqi election in decades as a result of the decision by an intergovernmental body to limit polling places in the United States.

"Iraq's out-of-country voting program began yesterday but the pro-democracy Iraqi American Christians, rather than being elated by the opportunity to vote in the first Iraqi election in decades, are enraged by what they see as ethnic discrimination against them in the process here in the United States and are debating whether to boycott it," stated Nina Shea, the director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom.

"This is devastating to a religious minority that is taking the brunt of terrorism and persecution within Iraq."

According to Shea, the problem stems from the decision of the International Organization of Migration (IOM)--the intergovernmental body contracted to carry out the operation--to limit polling places in the United States to five with only one of these located west of the Mississippi, namely Los Angeles. The other four cities include Nashville, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington.

"With absentee balloting not an option in the Iraqi vote, this means that tens of thousands of Iraqi Americans in areas distant from Los Angeles are effectively disenfranchised," Shea stated. "The 40,000 or so eligible voters who reside in California's Central Valley around Modesto and in the north would have to drive 1,800 miles within the next two weeks in order first to register to vote and again to actually cast ballots."

The director added that San Diego, the third-largest area of Iraqi settlement in the country after Detroit and Michigan and home to another estimated 25,000 eligible Iraqi voters, has also been passed over as a polling site. "It so happens that those in the affected areas are mainly ChaldoAssyrians, all of whom are Christian," Shea noted.

"Thousands of them will not be able to vote in a pivotal election for a constituent assembly to draft the permanent constitution and shape the next government of Iraq," Shea said.

The voting process, which extends over two weeks, started yesterday with a seven-day registration period. The actual voting itself is to occur between Jan. 28 and 30.

Last month it was announced that Iraqi expatriates living in 14 countries would be able to join in the Jan. 30 voting to elect the 275-member assembly that will appoint a government and draft a constitution. Italy-based AsiaNews reported that half a million participants are expected to vote out of the 800,000 eligible voters of more than three million Iraqi expatriates living in Canada, Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, the UAE, and the USA.

After the news made its way to the American ChaldoAssyrian community, activists such as Joseph Kassab, president of the Michigan-based Chaldean National Congress, immediately set about getting out voter-education materials on the Internet. But according to Shea, hope gave way to anger when the polling locations themselves were finally confirmed on Jan. 14, prompting appeals to the IOM from the Chaldean bishop in California, lawyers for the national ChaldoAssyrian Advocacy Council, and a delegation of California members of Congress.

However, Shea reported that IOM's out-of-country voting director in the U.S., Roger Bryant, has been unmoved by the grassroots petitions, and refuses to add polling sites in Modesto and San Diego. And despite the protest campaign, when questioned about the impending disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of California ChaldoAssyrians at the daily press briefing last Friday, State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher refused to comment other than to say he was unaware of the issue.

And so now, on top of the harsh persecution that is driving out the Christians from Iraq--due to perceptions by Islamist terrorists that they are pro-American--Shea says large numbers of Iraq's pro-democracy, pro-human-rights minority are now being needlessly disenfranchised from the Iraqi election within the United States.

According to the Associated Press, about 240,000 Iraqis are eligible to vote in the United States.

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