



Iraq Election May Worsen Ethnic, Sectarian Tension

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AMMAN (Reuters) -- President Bush has hailed Iraq's first postwar election as a "grand moment in Iraqi history" but it runs the risk of deepening communal divisions and pushing the country toward civil strife.

Sunday's poll for a national assembly is vital to the U.S. plan to transform Iraq from dictatorship to democracy, 22 months after an invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

"It has the potential to make things worse, precisely because it will accentuate communal differences," said Robert Springborg, director of the Middle East Institute at London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

The election is taking place in a security vacuum, with Iraqi state forces unable to check crime and lawlessness even in areas relatively untouched by anti-U.S. violence, said Toby Dodge, an Iraq expert at Queen Mary, University of London.

"Democracy amid anarchy is a difficult trick to pull off," he said.

Even U.S. officials do not suggest the election will halt the fierce Sunni-led insurgency that has gripped parts of Iraq, foiled reconstruction efforts and forced Washington to cast about for a credible exit strategy for its bloodied troops.

Insurgents, mainly Baathist nationalists linking up with local and foreign Muslim militants in the Sunni heartlands of central Iraq, believe they can outlast America.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's leader in Iraq, has declared war on an "infidel" election he says is a plot to hand power to Iraq's long-oppressed majority Shi'ites.

With most Sunni parties boycotting the election, saying it cannot be fair while U.S. troops occupy Iraq and violence rages, the result may swing disproportionate representation to the Shi'ites and Kurds who suffered most under Saddam's rule.

Shi'ites, themselves split down religious-secular lines, feel on the brink of political power at last. Minority Kurds are determined to cling to hard-won autonomy in the north.

As both groups press their demands, Sunnis may feel more excluded than ever by a poll that is going ahead without them. "The people who have been sidelined until now will be even more resentful -- Sunni Arabs who have been made refugees from their own cities like Falluja, or have been threatened by insurgents, or are just fed up and scared," said Rime Allaf of London's Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Anticipating Sunni alienation, many Iraqi politicians have stressed that Sunnis can still join the next government and help draft a constitution, even if they win few assembly seats.

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Whether Sunnis can be placated remains uncertain, given the communal tensions simmering since the removal of Saddam, whose Sunni-based regime crushed rebellious Shi'ites and Kurds.

Zarqawi seems bent on fomenting sectarian unrest, though Kurdish politicians and Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani have largely kept their followers from retaliating for bombings and killings claimed by the Jordanian militant's group.

With relatively few Sunnis joining Iraq's nascent security forces, Shi'ites and Kurds have also taken the brunt of attacks that have killed thousands of police, soldiers and recruits.

"What the election won't do is cure the violence," said Timothy Garden, a British Liberal Democrat Party defense spokesman, adding that serious efforts to build security forces had been left very late and results would take a long time.

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He predicted that insurgent attacks would spike during the election weekend and then subside to their usual level.

"The danger is that as the constitutional process unfolds new tensions will arise that produce step-ups of violence unless Iraqi forces are better trained," Garden said. "It will be very difficult to get everyone to feel they have got a good deal."

The new 275-seat assembly is supposed to pick a transitional government and write a constitution to be put to a referendum in October before another parliamentary election in December.

"This election is the starting gun but there is a long race to run," Springborg said. "It could fall flat if there is a very low turnout, lots of violence and retaliation."

Sistani, who guided the formation of the main Shi'ite electoral list, has so far checked any triumphalism by his supporters, but this might be harder after the election.

"Zarqawi has certainly been fanning the flames and must have engendered huge animosity among the Shi'ites," Springborg said.

"But civil war is not preordained. If the Shi'ite leadership stays cool and brings Sunnis into the constitution-drafting process, the election will be seen as a success," he added.

So is Sunday's vote a grand moment in Iraqi history?

"We will only be able to judge by the end of year whether it kickstarted democracy or ignited civil war," Springborg said.

By Alistair Lyon

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