



Inability to Compromise May Delay Iraqi Election

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BAGHDAD (AP) -- Iraq's parliament failed Monday to produce an election law acceptable to minority Sunni Arabs, prompting U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to say that nationwide balloting scheduled for January "might slip" to a later date.

The United States has linked the pace of its military drawdown to the elections, though the top U.S. commander in Iraq has said the schedule is on track for now. U.S. combat troops are supposed to be out of Iraq by August, and the rest of the forces are scheduled to leave by the end of 2011.

The dispute over an elections law highlights the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq. While more secure than in past years of war, the country has yet to achieve the political reconciliation vital to long-term stability.

Both Sunnis and Kurds have criticized earlier versions of the legislation. The parliament amended the law Monday with a version that pleased the Kurds but failed to appease Sunnis, triggering a likely second veto by the Sunni vice president and a delay in the elections.

Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, initially vetoed the law because he wanted more seats for Iraqis living abroad, most of whom are Sunnis. The minority, dominant under Saddam Hussein, has seen its privileged status evaporate since the ouster of the dictator and the election of a government led by the Shiite majority.

After days of intense negotiations by political blocs, lawmakers voted Monday to change the basis for distributing seats, most likely giving more seats to the powerful Kurdish bloc rather than to the Sunnis.

The number of seats in parliament will be expanded from 275 to about 320 under the amended law to reflect population growth.

The pre-vote dealmaking appeared to focus mostly on efforts to address complaints about the electoral system from the Kurds in order to win their support for the law, causing dozens of Sunni lawmakers to walk out.

"What has happened today represents a setback to the policy of political accordance that the parliament has adopted," said Salim Abdullah, spokesman for the Accordance Front, the biggest Sunni bloc in the parliament.

Al-Hashemi is likely to veto the amended law now that it returns to the three-member presidential council, but parliament can override a second veto with a three-fifths majority. Shiite and Kurdish political blocs have enough votes for an override.

"We will wait for the answer from the presidential council before deciding future moves," said Faraj al-Haidari, chief of the election commission. "I think that it is very difficult to hold the elections in January. Most probably, it might be moved to February."

In Washington, Clinton said the dispute might delay the Iraqi election date but she expressed confidence that the voting eventually will be held.

"We believe on balance that there will be elections," Clinton said. "They might slip by some period of time until this is worked out, because at some point the law has to be in place for the planning to begin, and so there necessarily needs to be a period of time in which the planning can occur."

Clinton told reporters at the State Department that U.S. officials were trying to help Iraqi politicians sort out differences over the law.

Sunni Arabs are unlikely to sit out the 2010 elections, a tactic that would deprive them of political clout. They boycotted Iraq's first post-Saddam parliamentary election in January 2005 in a move that left them without much influence in a legislature that drafted the country's constitution.

They took part in the Dec. 2005 election that produced the present parliament.

The amendment reshuffles the distribution of seats among Iraq's provinces, basing it on 2005 Trade Ministry statistics plus 2.8 percent annual population growth, instead of the 2009 Trade Ministry figures.

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This solution would likely give Kurds more seats in the next parliament. The Kurds have threatened to boycott the elections if the three provinces they control in northern Iraq are not allocated more seats.

The amendment also says Iraqis living abroad will have their votes counted toward their home province, rather than allocating seats for voters outside Iraq, as al-Hashemi had requested.

Sunni lawmaker Osama al-Nujeifi said the amendment was a "grave constitutional violation" and would transfer seats from northern provinces where Sunnis have a strong presence to semiautonomous provinces controlled by Kurds.

"It is a way to steal seats from Mosul and Salahuddin provinces and give them to Kurdistan provinces in an illegitimate way," he said.

Fouad Massoum, a senior Kurdish lawmaker, said the amendment was fair.

The U.N. has estimated that there were about 2 million Iraqi refugees in neighboring Jordan and Syria, and some 2.6 million people displaced within Iraq. The total population is at least 27 million.

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