

Communalism dominates run up to Iraqi provincial elections

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The plan to hold provincial elections on October 1 is provoking intense conflicts and preparing the conditions for renewed warfare between rival Iraqi factions.

In the predominantly Sunni Arab-populated western province of Anbar, the election is pitting the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) against the so-called Awakening Council—a coalition of tribal leaders who began collaborating with the US military in late 2006.

In the 2005 elections, only the IIP stood candidates and just two percent of Anbar's population voted. The vast majority of people supported the insurgency against the bitterly-hated US occupation. The city of Fallujah had been virtually destroyed by the American military in November 2004. Until last year, the province was the epicentre of the Sunni resistance.

The formation of the Awakening Council was prompted by the recognition among sections of the Sunni elite that they were being sidelined by the establishment of a US-backed Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated government in Baghdad. They were also hostile to the radical Islamist tendencies that had come to dominate the insurgency in Anbar. The US military agreed to pay and equip a large militia loyal to tribal sheiks to shatter the Islamists. In many cases, those enlisted had been involved in the fighting against US forces over the previous years. As many as 23,000 tribal fighters have been incorporated into the Anbar police and some 8,000 are still organised as a separate militia.

Attacks on US forces have fallen so significantly that US commander General David Petraeus proposed to hand security for Anbar over to local Iraqi security forces—whose loyalties are split between the IIP and the Awakening Council militias—on June 27.

The IIP-dominated provincial government sought in May to assert its control by dismissing police head, General Tariq Yousef al-Asaal, a loyalist of the tribal sheiks. Asaal has simply ignored his dismissal and continued to command his multi-thousand strong police/militia force. He told the *Washington Post*: “It was a political decision. They think the police will influence the elections. The Iraqi Islamic Party's credibility on the streets is zero. Nobody supports them. They want their own police chief so they can fake the results.”

Political violence has since begun to increase. The Fallujah offices of the IIP were blown up on June 12. On June 26, a suicide bomber attacked a meeting of US officers and Awakening Council leaders, killing three sheiks. The US military used heavy sandstorms on June 27 as the pretext to announce a delay in the security handover, which still has not taken place.

The situation in the province was described as “tense” by a police commander interviewed by *Azzaman*. An indefinite curfew was imposed on Monday in Ramadi, Fallujah, and other major Anbar towns such as Haditha, ostensibly in response to the recent bombings. Vehicles have been banned from entering or leaving the cities and traffic banned from the streets.

The IIP provincial government called this week for the handover to be delayed until after the election, declaring that the Anbar police were “not ready to take over security responsibilities”. The party is clearly fearful that the Awakening Council militias, if unchecked by US forces, will intimidate IIP candidates and supporters and assist the tribal sheiks to take political power in Anbar. Multi-billion investment plans to develop the province's massive Akkaz natural gas field, with estimated reserves of over seven trillion cubic feet of gas, have heightened the rivalry.

If the provincial elections do not deliver control of Anbar to the sheiks, significant sections of the Awakening movement may well return to armed resistance against the US occupation.

Awakening groups are also seeking to win political positions in provinces such as Babil, Salahaddin, Ninevah and in Baghdad, where some 43,000 mainly Sunni militiamen are on the payroll of the US military. In most cases, they are campaigning on the basis of hostility to the Shiite-dominated national government, which is refusing to enlist any more than 20 percent of the militiamen into the official military or police. Once the US ceases paying the Awakening groups, thousands of the Sunni fighters will have no incentive to either cooperate with the government or the occupation forces.

In the majority Shiite provinces of southern Iraq, the elections are also unfolding in an atmosphere of growing tensions. The largest Shiite party in the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), is seeking to win the governorship of all nine southern provinces.

Its perspective is to transform the south into an autonomous Shiite region with the same powers as the Kurdish region in the three northern provinces of Iraq. Under the Iraqi constitution, a regional government, rather than the central government, has jurisdiction over all new oil and gas projects on its territory. The bulk of Iraq's untapped oil fields are located in the southern Shiite provinces, particularly Basra. The Shiite elite would therefore be able to monopolise the revenues that would flow from their exploitation—to the detriment of the Sunni establishment that dominated under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

ISCI is using its influence in the government and over the Iraqi army and police to conduct a campaign of intimidation and terror against its political rivals. Major security operations this year in Basra, Baghdad and Amarah have targeted the Sadrist movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which opposes the ISCI's regionalism from the standpoint of Iraqi nationalism. Hundreds of Sadrists have been killed or arrested. Possibly reflecting the extent of the havoc wreaked to the movement, Sadr announced that it would not be standing candidates in the elections but would support independents.

In a recent example, police stormed a Sadrist mosque in Diwaniyah on July 11 and detained cleric Hussein Haddam al-Karbalai on charges of insulting Maliki and the ISCI local government officials.

An analyst at Basra University, Azer Naji, told the *Christian Science Monitor* earlier this month: "The Supreme Council and its allies are in the forefront now while the Sadrists are absent, but we can see signs that the struggle among the Shiite religious parties will turn into a violent and armed one again, especially in the south." The article cited the assassinations of an ISCI official in Basra on July 4 and the Basra chief of military intelligence the week before.

The situation in northern city of Kirkuk, in the province of Tamim, is potentially the most explosive. At stake is control over Iraq's oldest producing oil fields. Between 12 and 14 million barrels of oil are currently exported from the Kirkuk field each month, via pipelines to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The fields are estimated to still hold reserves of between 8 and 10 billion barrels.

The Kurdish nationalist parties, the second largest faction in the Iraqi parliament, aspire to incorporate Kirkuk and its resources into the autonomous Kurdish region (KRG) which they dominate in northern Iraq. The KRG consists at present of three majority Kurdish provinces, Irbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah. As well as Kirkuk, the Kurdish parties claim districts of Ninevah, Diyala and Salahaddin provinces.

The US-vetted constitution adopted by Iraq in late 2004 included Article 140, which recognised the Kurdish claim and stipulated that a referendum over the incorporation of Kirkuk and other disputed areas into the Kurdish region by the end of 2007. The Kurdish bloc agreed to a six-month delay and has accepted a further delay while a UN mission prepares a recommendation on the issue. Its first report, presented on June 5, recommended that two districts of Ninevah province be absorbed into the KRG and that two other districts, in Ninevah and Diyala, remain under Iraqi government control. The UN team has not yet offered an opinion on Kirkuk.

The city has a tortured history, which has left a legacy of bitter ethnic conflicts. In the wake of Kurdish rebellions, the Baathist regime pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing in Kirkuk from 1975 on, evicting large numbers of Kurds and Turkomen and replacing them with Arabs who were considered more loyal to the Arab-dominated Iraqi state. As many as 200,000 Kurds and at least 50,000 Turkomen were allegedly forced out.

During the 2003 US invasion, Kurdish militia forces occupied the city. A state-sanctioned policy of reverse ethnic cleansing has been underway since, with tens of thousands of Kurds returning

and large numbers of Arabs being pressured to leave. Kurdish-Arab relations have been poisoned as a result. Ethnic Turkomen, fearing Kurdish persecution, are also opposed to the city being incorporated into the KRG. The city, which is effectively divided into Kurdish, Arab and Turkomen zones, has been rocked by spasms of violence and bombings.

The position of the Turkish government further complicates the situation. Ankara has concerns that Kirkuk's oil wealth would give the KRG too much economic clout and encourage Kurdish separatism in eastern Turkey. It has warned that no referendum should be held and threatened to militarily intervene into northern Iraq, ostensibly to defend the Turkish-speaking Turkomen community.

The Bush administration appears to be behind a push to not hold elections in Kirkuk. A proposal to delay the election for six months in Tamim province was put to the Iraqi parliament on Tuesday. It provoked a Kurdish walk-out, however, when Arab and Turkomen legislators attempted to include an accompanying stipulation that the current provincial government be replaced by one made up of 10 Arab, 10 Turkomen, 10 Kurdish and two Christian representatives. The Kurdish parties currently dominate the government due to a boycott of the 2005 election by large numbers of Arabs and Turkomen.

Negotiations toward securing Kurdish agreement on the plan are still taking place. The parliament on Wednesday postponed a final vote on the legislation governing the provincial elections until next Monday. The legislation will include delaying a ballot in Kirkuk.

The campaign in the northern provinces is still likely to be marked by violence even if the Kirkuk question is put to the side. The Kurdish bloc has announced that it will be seeking to win control of the governorship of Ninevah, at the expense of Sunni parties. Large numbers of Kurdish troops and police are deployed in Mosul, the provincial capital. The most radical Kurdish nationalists also call for Mosul to be annexed to the KRG.

The tensions surrounding the election underscore the fragility of the purported successes achieved by the US occupation over the past year. Far from the "surge" laying the basis for a unified and viable state, the policies implemented by General Petraeus have benefited sectarian and regionally based factions of the Iraqi ruling elite. The antagonistic agendas of the rival factions set the stage for not only further suffering for the Iraqi people and the potential disintegration of the country, but renewed resistance to the destructive presence of US forces.



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