Move to block major Sunni-based party contesting Iraq election

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Iraq's Justice and Accountability Board, formerly known as the National De-Baathification Committee, recommended last Thursday that 14 parties which derive the bulk of their support from the minority Sunni population be barred from contesting the March 7 national election. The basis for the proposed ban is that they have promoted the ideology of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party. The recommendation must be ratified by the Electoral Commission and upheld in the Supreme Court before coming into effect. If the ban goes ahead, it has the potential to ignite civil warfare and renewed, large-scale resistance to the ongoing US military presence.

The largest party under threat is the National Dialogue Front (NDF) led by secular nationalist politician Saleh al-Mutlaq. The NDF won 11 seats in the December 2005 parliamentary election. It has functioned as a kind of loyal opposition for the US occupation, criticising its atrocities but in practice arguing that the Sunni elite can regain its privileges only by accepting Iraq's reduction to an American client state.

Under Hussein's regime, Mutlaq presided over a multi-million dollar agriculture business. He was not, however, an official member of the ruling party. The attempt to ban his NDF on the basis that it is "Baathist" is a transparent attempt to protect the interests of Shiite and Kurdish parties that were installed by the US and dominate the current parliament and the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

In the lead-up to the March vote, Mutlaq has formed an electoral bloc called the Iraq National Movement (INM) with Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite and CIA asset who was the first US-installed puppet prime minister, and current Sunni vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi. The INM is making a secular appeal to layers who are hostile to sectarian politics. It has denounced Kurdish claims on the city of Kirkuk and alleged Iranian influence over the Shiite parties. Mutlaq has been particularly vocal in condemning Maliki's muted response to last month's brief occupation of the al-Fakka oil field on the Iran-Iraq border by Iranian troops.

The INM had been expecting to win a substantial proportion of the parliament's 323 seats. It is likely to win a majority of Sunni votes this time as well as support among secular Shiites. The Shiite fundamentalist parties are split into two rival camps, one led by Maliki's Da'wa Party and the other dominated by the Iranian-linked Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement. The Kurdish bloc is openly communalist and will win little support outside the autonomous Kurdish region. Even there, its votes will be eroded by the emergence of oppositional parties appealing to the popular disaffection among Kurds over corruption and nepotism.

A possible election outcome could be Maliki's "State of Law" alliance forming a governing coalition with the INM, rather than Maliki's previous Shiite and Kurdish allies. Iraqi press reports have suggested that an INM figure such as Deputy Prime Minister Rafi Al-Issawi or even Allawi could become prime minister. In that eventuality, Mutlaq would gain a prominent government position.

The Justice and Accountability Board that is seeking

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to ban Mutlaq's NDF which is headed by Ali Faysal al-Lami, who has ties to the Iranian regime and the ISCI-dominated bloc. The majority of the parliament's seven-member Justice and Accountability Committee that endorsed his recommendations belong to the Sadrist movement, ISCI and the Kurdish bloc.

Mutlaq condemned the decision as "foolish," telling the *New York Times*: "They fear my popularity. They think that banning me will isolate the Sunnis, stop them from taking part and marginalise them." In other comments, he has denounced the recommendation as a decision made in Tehran and further proof of Iranian dominance over the current parliament.

At a press conference on Friday, Mutlaq declared: "The committee's decision is politically motivated as the national bloc becomes too popular and it would possibly be the biggest bloc in the coming parliament, so they want to weaken it before the elections."

In a joint statement issued on Friday by Mutlaq, Allawi and Hashemi, the INM threatened to boycott the March election if the ban was enacted. "The leaders of the list and its allies will reconsider their participation in the election, which could jeopardise the electoral and political process," it warned.

Hinting at the possible consequences, an Iraqi source in the volatile majority Sunni city of Baquba told the *New York Times*: "Mutlaq's alliance is a peaceful political movement. Its disqualification might lead it to carry weapons against the state."

Tensions in Sunni communities were already rising before this latest provocation. The attempt to proscribe Mutlaq and other Sunni parties follows the rewriting of the electoral law by the Shiite and Kurdish parties to reduce the proportion of seats elected in Sunni areas. There have also been reports of widespread arrests and killings of Sunnis by government troops and police.

According to the newspaper *Azzaman*, "hundreds of young people have been taken away from Tikrit, Anbar and Mosul". In Baghdad, there have allegedly been numerous arrests in the Sunni majority district of Abu Ghraib, in the west of the city. At least 10 militiamen of the Sunni "Awakening" militias in the capital have reportedly been assassinated.

The Obama administration has made no public comment on the actions of the Justice and Accountability Board. However, it can hardly welcome a development that threatens to inflame communal tensions and undermine arrangements that underpin its plans to reduce troop numbers down to 50,000 by August and redirect US forces to Afghanistan.

It is barely two years since the US military struck a deal with the bulk of the Sunni-based insurgency to abandon armed resistance in exchange for an end to sectarian persecution by Shiite forces, regular payment and implicit guarantees of greater political influence for the Sunni elite. More than 100,000 fighters were enlisted into the Awakening militias. According to most reports, Mutlaq played a significant role in making that deal, particularly in convincing tribal sheiks in his home province of Anbar to align with the US occupation.

Joost Hiltermann, an analyst for the International Crisis Group, told the Associated Press: "This [the proposed ban] is a terrible move. The Awakening Councils came up in part because they had been promised they could rejoin the political process. The elections are for Sunnis the make-or-break event for their participation in the state of Iraq."

According to the latest reports, Maliki convened a meeting of his National Security Council on Sunday to discuss the ramifications of a proscription of Sunni parties. The Electoral Commission is expected to rule on the recommendations in the next several days.

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