

Iraq: Animosities grow over banning of election candidates

James Cogan
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The campaign for the March 7 election in Iraq is unfolding under conditions of heightened sectarian tensions within the country's already bitterly divided political establishment. Hundreds of candidates who were nominated by Sunni-based and secular-orientated parties have been barred from standing in an attempt to undermine opposition to the Shiite fundamentalist parties that have dominated all the parliaments formed under the US occupation.

The bans were imposed by the Justice and Accountability Board, formerly known as the de-Baathification Committee. It was established by the US occupation regime in 2003 to purge tens of thousands of members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from the Iraqi state and military.

Last month, the Board ruled that over 500 nominees for the coming election had past Baathist links or had promoted Baath "ideology" and were therefore ineligible to stand for parliament. A number of them had taken part and won seats in the December 2005 election, including the defence minister, Abdul Kader al-Obeidi, and Saleh al-Mutlaq, the head of the Sunni-based National Dialogue Front (NDF), which holds 11 seats in the current parliament.

After cases of mistaken identity were clarified, 458 individuals remained banned. The Justice and Accountability Board's rulings have been upheld by both the parliamentary committee tasked with reviewing its decisions and by the Electoral Commission. Court hearings have rejected the appeals of Saleh al-Mutlaq and other prominent excluded candidates.

Over 6,600 candidates had nominated for the election, representing 86 parties and coalitions. Of the 458 banned nominees, 72 belong to the alliance now known as Iraqiya, which includes Mutlaq's NDF, the party of Sunni vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi and the Iraqi National Accord of Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite who was the US-installed prime minister of the first puppet government in Iraq. At least 77

belong to a secular coalition, Iraq Unity, which is headed by the current interior minister, Jawad al-Bolani, and includes the Anbar Awakening Council headed by Sheik Ahmed Abu Risha.

The Awakening Council was established by Risha's assassinated brother and consists of tens of thousands of fighters, many of them former Sunni insurgents, who were paid off by the US military in late 2007 to end their resistance. It was the model for Sunni insurgent leaders in Baghdad and elsewhere to cease fighting in exchange for cash, promises of protection from Shiite militias and the prospect of a political role in the Iraqi state.

Scores of other Sunnis and secular Shiites from smaller regional groups have been banned also. According to General David Petraeus, the head of US Central Command, "55 percent or so" of those excluded are Shiite and "45 percent or so" are Sunni.

These barred have denounced the bans as political and illegitimate. The Justice and Accountability Board is a nominally independent authority but it is headed by Ali Faysal al-Lami, a Shiite fundamentalist. Among Lami's closest associates is the former CIA asset Ahmad Chalabi, who was sidelined by the occupation forces in 2004 due to suspicions he had developed ties with the Iranian regime. Lami himself was seized by the US military and detained in allegedly harsh conditions from August 2008 until August 2009 on allegations he was involved with Iranian-backed Shiite militias that carried out wholesale sectarian violence against Sunni civilians during 2006 and 2007.

Lami and Chalabi are both standing in the March election as candidates of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—the Shiite-based coalition dominated by the Iranian-linked Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Lami's actions have been publicly supported by not only ISCI and Sadrist figures,

however, but also by senior members of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Da'wa Party, which left the UIA last year and formed a rival electoral coalition called the "State of Law".

While Maliki attempted to portray his new bloc as non-sectarian, he failed to convince any significant Sunni or secular parties to join it. By endorsing the exclusion of alleged "Baathists" he is apparently hoping to win back support from fundamentalist Shiite elements who were disgruntled by his overtures.

Efforts by the Obama administration to have the banning decision reversed have failed. During an unscheduled visit to Baghdad on January 22 and 23, US Vice-President Joe Biden reportedly attempted to pressure Maliki and other powerbrokers to push for a compromise. A proposal to allow the banned candidates to stand, and investigate only those who won seats for Baathist links was rejected as unfeasible.

Subsequent US statements have been muted, but there are serious concerns in Washington and the Pentagon over the prospect of a major deterioration in the security situation in Iraq. By August, the US military is planning to withdraw 57,000 more troops from Iraq, leaving 50,000 as an ongoing presence in the country and freeing up forces for other operations.

There is, however, seething popular anger and resentment against the US occupation and the Baghdad government. After years of warfare that left hundreds of thousands of people dead or maimed and close to four million displaced from their homes, the population has been left with a ruined economy, shattered infrastructure and few prospects for the future. Adding to the discontent, the government and Iraqi security forces are rife with corruption and nepotism.

The Sunni and secular parties most affected by the actions of the Justice and Accountability Board expected to make significant electoral gains on March 7 with demagogic appeals to the popular disaffection. They commonly denounce Shiite parties of being agents of Iran—against which Hussein's Baathist regime waged a bloody war from 1980 to 1988. As well as whipping up sectarian tensions, the accusation is also aimed at appealing to Washington as it intensifies pressure on Iran over its nuclear programs.

Saleh al-Mutlaq criticised the US refusal to intervene more aggressively to overturn the ban as a capitulation to Iran. He told the Dubai *Gulf News*: "Under the pressure of President Obama's strategy to pull out of Iraq as soon as possible, the

US administration seems to have accepted a certain level of Iranian influence in Iraq's internal politics. In this case, the US has allowed the accountability commission to rig the election by disregarding Iran's political opposition in Iraq, including Sunni leaders. It is shameful, but this is what Sunnis can read from the conflicting US stands in Iraq."

In a February 1 interview with Agence France Presse, Christopher Hill, the US ambassador in Iraq, rejected suggestions that Washington's influence over Iraq was waning. He admitted, however, that the entire policy of de-Baathification pursued by the US occupation had produced "deep emotions among Iraqis... and is very much an ongoing concern".

Within the Sunni and secular parties, discussions are taking place over an election boycott if the exclusions are not reversed. Sheik Ahmed Abu Risha warned that in Anbar, once a focus of the anti-US insurgency, people "will not care about the election, they will ignore it maybe, if these decisions stand".

Mutlaq has gone further and warned that the "situation is opened for a variety of options, including resurgence of violence in the Sunni areas". He told *USA Today* on January 31: "If they continue to go this route, it means the elections are fixed from the beginning. If they continue like this, people are going to lose hope in democracy in Iraq. When people lose hope, they turn to extremism."

Amid these rising sectarian tensions, there has been a series of bombings over the past several weeks. Suicide bombers targeted two hotels in Baghdad on January 25 and the interior ministry the following day. This week, a female bomber detonated an explosion among Shiite civilians taking part in a religious festival in Baghdad. At least 54 people were killed and over 100 wounded. There is every likelihood that the bloodshed will intensify in the lead-up to the March 7 election.



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