

A Game of Political Dominos

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The pre-election political scene is still taking shape with solid alliances yet to be formed.

The outlines of possible political alliances have begun to appear ahead of Iraq's January elections - although parties seem reluctant to commit to anything at this stage.

Some 150 parties and groups have now been registered to take part in the election for a transitional national assembly, whose main task will be to draft a constitution, which will be put to a referendum by the end of next year.

Shia candidates appear to be divided into two main groupings. The first, which includes the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, is made up of parties participating in the current transitional government which agree on enough issues to form a single list in the election.

These parties are expected to team up with movements such as the Islamic Labour Organisation and the Islamic Accord Movement, supervised by clerics like Ayatollah Hadi al-Muderresi and Ayatollah Taqi al-Muderresi.

Shia politics have taken on an extra edge recently, following the edict issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Shia Islam's supreme cleric, urging all his co-religionists to participate in the election.

Since his announcement, Sistani's deputies have been stressing the importance of voting in Shia mosques throughout the country.

Despite this, the secretary general of the Dawa party - and Iraqi vice-president - Ibrahim al-Jafari, has expressed doubts about whether the forthcoming ballot will be conducted fairly.

The Dawa party is also part of the other Shia grouping, made up of 13 parties including the Iraqi National Congress headed by the Pentagon's former golden boy Ahmed Chalabi and the Islamic Dawa party (not to be confused with the Dawa party itself) represented by Ezzul Deen al-Barrak and Sheikh Abdul Kareem Mahood, both former members of the now dissolved Governing Council.

While Iraq's Shias appear to be widely backing the elections, there are dissenting voices. Jawad al-Boolani, spokesman for the influential Shia political council, said he believes the mechanism chosen for the elections is unfair and the whole process is happening to suit a United States, not Iraqi, timetable.

"Voters are obliged to vote for one list that covers Iraq from north to south," he said. "It's anti-democratic and denies the Iraqis their right to choose their own representatives. It is a rushed step imposed by the Americans."

But according to Jafari, the election process fits with the current situation in Iraq.

Controversial Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who has repeatedly locked horns with the established Shia

clergy, has also recently announced his intention to field candidates in the election.

Although his group has made no further announcements, observers believe he is keen to cultivate disaffected political groups that did not cooperate with the US occupation and that are not currently part of the interim government.

Those smaller parties, in turn, want to benefit from what is perceived as the extensive support the 31-year-old cleric enjoys among Iraq's poor.

But there are dissenting voices there too. Mahmood al-Hasani, a prominent figure in the Sadrist movement, issued a statement - distributed around Shia cities - prohibiting any participation in the election.

Al-Hasani perhaps has good reason for his personal bias against elections - he is wanted by the Coalition, which issued an arrest warrant for him six months ago.

The Kurdish parties, which will simultaneously be running for their own regional elections, look set to be represented in a single list in the national ballot.

The list will be headed by the region's two main parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, KDP, which are already well represented in the interim government.

Observers believe the Kurdish list will ultimately be expanded to include other secular parties such as the Iraqi Communist Party, former prime ministerial candidate Adnan al-Pachachi's National Gathering, the National Democratic Party headed by Nasir al-Chaderchi, and the Arab Socialist Movement led by Abdul Ilah al-Nasrawi.

What will happen with Iraq's Sunni Arabs, nationalists and fundamental Islamists based in the Sunni triangle, is another story.

At present, the Sunni groups are calling for a boycott of the elections, largely in reaction to the military operations ongoing in Fallujah.

The Sunni's most influential religious authority in Iraq, the Association of Muslim Scholars, has stated that their stance towards the elections will depend on the outcome of the Sharm el-Sheik conference, where world leaders are discussing Iraq.

The Sunnis' Iraqi Islamic Party, regarded as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, has withdrawn from the current government in protest at the US-led attacks on Fallujah.

But the party's only government member, Minister of Industry Hachim al-Hasani, has refused to resign from his post, saying that the future of Iraq involves more than this single issue.

As far as the country's leadership goes, current prime minister Iyad Allawi, a member of the National Accord Party, is a strong candidate to stay on as head of the government following the elections.

He will inevitably have the difficult job of leading an alliance of disparate national and religious movements as well as a sprinkling of independent candidates, such as moderate Shia cleric Hussein al-Sadr, admired by the Americans and supported by independent Shias.

In the current climate of uncertainty, much could change in the two months before the elections actually take place.

With more military operations apparently planned, Iraqis will just have to wait until the dust has settled before picking their way through a political landscape that is still in formation.

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Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

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