

Political Maneuvring in Kirkuk

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Diversity of parties and factions begin forging electoral alliances ahead of January vote.

With Iraq's national elections just over three months away, political groups in the northern city of Kirkuk are already jostling for power – and eyeing each other up as potential coalition partners.

Kirkuk is as close to a microcosm of the Iraqi political scene as you can get, with its multiplicity of communities, and a range of political parties – ethnic, religious and secular – to match.

It's also important in its own right, given its position at the centre of an oil-producing area and the claims and counter claims of Kurds, Turkoman and other groups that the city should belong to them.

Last week, the Higher Election Commission, HEC, announced the opening of an electoral centre which will organise and run the election through a network of 23 local offices across Kirkuk governorate.

The Kirkuk centre is one of the electoral management bodies which the HEC is setting up across Iraq to pave the way for the January 31 ballot, intended to elect a national assembly that will draft a constitution to replace the current transitional law.

Subject to a national referendum scheduled for October next year, the country will move forward to a full parliamentary election, in which up to 450 political groups could take part in the first multi-party race for seats in half a century.

In the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq, the January election is being seen as a litmus test for their eventual status – in other words, the extent to which the area known as Iraqi Kurdistan will win some kind of autonomy.

Kirkuk lies just outside the Kurdish provinces that won de facto independence in 1991. While Kurds there hope the city and surrounding governorate would be incorporated into any future autonomous entity, local Arabs and Turkoman are against any change in status.

But as the political party scene unfolds, the battle lines are not quite as clear as this suggests.

The two main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party, KDP, led by Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, are likely to form an election bloc in Iraq, according to an announcement made by PUK leader Jalal Talabani.

Some analysts are predicting that the PUK-KDP alliance will be expanded to embrace the Iraqi Communist Party as well as various parties representing the Assyrian Christian minority in Kirkuk.

Both the Assyrians and members of the related Chaldean faith would have an interest in joining such an election bloc as a way of winning representation in the national assembly. There is a precedent for this, since they are already involved in the ruling coalition in the Kurdish governorates of Arbil, Sulaimaniyah

and Dahuk.

Countrywide, the Shia – thought to account 60 per cent of Iraq’s population –constitute a powerful electorate. In Kirkuk province the percentage is lower, and consists largely of parts of the Arab and Turkoman communities. The Shia Turkoman are represented by two groups, the Islamic Union of Iraqi Turkomans and al-Wafaa al-Turkomani, both of which have declared they will join the broad alliance of Shia groups that is likely to contest the election across Iraq.

A coalition centring on the Iraqi Islamic Party and the Muslim Clerics’ Board is emerging as the main vehicle for Iraq’s Sunni Arab constituency. There are signs that this coalition will expand to include non-religious political forces of Sunni background. In Kirkuk, for example, the Arab National Bloc and the Arab National Front – which have wide support among Arabs west of Kirkuk – have decided to join the alliance.

Sources within the Sunni coalition say negotiations are now under way with the Turkoman Front, a group whose nationalist views have created tensions in its relationship with Kurdish forces.

Khudeir Ghalib Kahya, who represents the Turkoman Front on the broader Turkoman Council, says the latter, an umbrella group of parties and individuals, is also considering joining the Sunni alliance. Kahya ruled out any Turkoman coalition with the Kurds.

Turkoman politicians appear conscious of the weight they carry in Kirkuk, given the number of votes they can bring to the table. A few weeks ago, the leader of the Turkmen Eli party, Riyadh Sari Kahya, voiced concern at the lack of clarity on the electoral process, and hinted that his group might mount a boycott if this was not resolved.

Those with a more global view of the election take a more positive view, talking about its value in terms of establishing democratic change and getting political rivals to collaborate rather than fight.

Tahseen Kahya, the chairman of Kirkuk governorate’s assembly, and an ethnic Turkoman, said that whatever the result of the vote, it will set a historical precedent for Iraq and open the way to democratic practices.

Fareed Asseserd, director of the Kurdistan Centre for Strategic Studies in Kirkuk, agreed, saying, “Consensus between competing groups will be the most effective principle in the end.

“All the parties realise that the election is the ideal means for solving Iraq’s complicated problems, and that if the election fails it will be everyone’s loss.”

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