

Questions Surround Elections

Author: [Hiwa Osman](#)

Iraqi politicians try to figure out whether they will win or lose from new political road-map.

The new plans to establish self-government in Iraq potentially opens a new chapter in the country's history. But some politicians involved in the process are concerned at the way it is being done, and about the implications for a future Iraq.

The agreement between the Iraqi Governing Council and the United States-run Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA, provides for indirect elections to an interim parliament, which will in turn vote in a transitional government by the end of June.

The plan was warmly greeted by politicians and ordinary Iraqis alike after it was revealed in mid-November.

However, the fact that the assembly will be created by indirect elections, together with the plan for Iraq to be governed under a still undefined federal system, has set off alarm bells among some political factions. They are now manoeuvring to place themselves in positions of strength ahead of the political changes.

Other politicians who have benefited from the current political set-up are likely to worry that any changes could cost them their power.

Under the new accord, the Governing Council and the CPA will agree by the end of February on a "fundamental law" - a declaration of principles that will govern the political transition. The fast-track schedule for creating sovereign institutions means that the 250-member transitional assembly will be in place by the end of May, and the interim government a month later.

After this, both the Governing Council and the CPA will cease to exist and the military occupation by the US-led coalition will officially end.

In the final phase of the transitional period, the interim government will organise first a process for debating a new constitution and approving it by referendum, and then full elections to a national parliament by the end of 2005.

Many of the elements in this road-map and the sequence in which they are to happen - as well as the compressed time-scale - are similar to the model now being implemented in Afghanistan.

Each Iraqi political grouping has its own set of concerns about the plan. Kurdish leaders want a clear definition of federalism, given their own aspirations for autonomy. The Shia want to hold on to the majority they currently have on the Governing Council - a position of strength that they have long sought in Iraq. The various Sunni Arab political, tribal, and religious factions - which tend to be much smaller and more divided than their Kurdish or Shia equivalents - each want to make sure that they are represented in the traditional government.

There are also some members of the US-appointed Governing Council who lack a real power-base, or could

face competition, and fear that they might not be elected to the transitional assembly and could lose their power.

The issue of federalism is likely to prove highly contentious given Iraq's diverse population and troubled recent history. In addition to a bill of rights and other basic principles of modern governance, the proposed fundamental law is supposed to set out the scope and structure for a federal arrangement of government.

But views of what a federal Iraq would look like differ sharply.

The Governing Council's current chairman Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, told a recent press conference said that the fundamental law would take into consideration the "special status" of Kurdistan.

The Kurds are calling for a broad region with federal status that would include the three northern governorates they have ruled since 1992, plus parts of the newly-liberated Kirkuk and Mosul governorates.

But there is no mention of special status for the Kurdish north in the initial written agreement between the council and the CPA. The latter has so far been talking about a very different type of arrangement, where the 18 existing governorates would each have the same federal status.

In addition, many Kurds worry that they could lose out if the US scales back its presence in the country once the new national institutions are in place. They see the US as protection both against interference from other countries in the region, and for their position as a minority in an otherwise Arab country.

The country's Arabic-speaking population has other issues to worry about, in particular the way it is represented in the proposed new transitional assembly.

In each governorate, an appointed "preparatory committee" will choose a caucus that will pick members for the assembly - one for every 100,000 people in the region. One third of each committee will be appointed by the Governing Council, but the remaining two-thirds will be appointed by existing governorate and district councils.

This formula is of concern for those Governing Council members who have no local constituency, such as returning members of the Iraqi diaspora or some businessmen.

Shia politicians are concerned about the way the agreement has been put together. In recent months the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, has been calling for direct elections to allow Iraqis to choose their elected representatives and constitution without outside interference.

When the new road-map was announced, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who represents SCIRI on the Governing Council, complained that the timetable for the transitional period had been agreed without serious consideration, and that the Iraqi people had been "pushed aside". On November 26 he was joined by Iraq's Shia spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who said next year's elections to the transitional bodies should be direct.

Apart from these arguments about the democratic process, and demands that the new institutions should be designed to be more Islamic, Shia politicians may also fear losing their majority position in government.

At the moment they hold 13 out of 25 seats on the Governing Council. But the Shia political scene remains fractured, and the true popularity of the various groups and figures involved has not been tested. Most of the former opposition parties say they represent the Shia population, but there is no guarantee that they do so.

Some parties may fear that they would perform poorly in elections, and that maintaining the status quo. One option for them would be to find some way in which the Governing Council could continue to play some role within the transitional arrangements for government.

The Sunni Arabs' involvement in the current set-up is much more limited, so in a sense they have more to gain from a change. They have just five representatives - three politicians, a businessman, and a tribal leader - on the present Governing Council.

The broader assembly envisaged for the end of May would no doubt make space for more tribal leaders and other influential figures from Iraq's "Sunni triangle". It is likely to also include some Sunni Arabs who have so far been outside the post-war political system, and who may consider the CPA and the Governing Council illegitimate.

Despite the rival and at times conflicting interests that are likely to appear as the political process takes shape, the transitional assembly - by offering a form of proportional representation to the regions - will go some way to silencing those critics who say the Governing Council lacks legitimacy. Assembly members will at least be able to say they were chosen by Iraqis, not Americans.

The aim is clearly to provide more local legitimacy for Iraq's rulers, but there is still a lot of work to be done to spell out how a mechanism that ensures reasonably fair elections can be made to work. And above all, what federalism means.

Hiwa Osman is an IWPR editor/trainer in Baghdad.

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