

Reconciliation Back on Iraqi Agenda?

Series of factors combine to bolster bridge-building efforts that last year ground to a virtual standstill. Crucial legislative reforms, the recent improvement in the security situation and renewed political cooperation are helping to revive the long-awaited reconciliation process.

Key to the new sense of optimism was the recent passing of the accountability and justice law, under which many former members of the Ba'ath party sacked from government jobs after the fall of Saddam will be either reinstated or receive state pensions.

"This law is very important to push forward the national reconciliation process," said Shaza al-Abousi, a member of the Iraqi Accord Front, the biggest Sunni bloc in parliament.

The new legislation is a reform of the Coalition Provisional Authority's controversial deBa'athification law, whose introduction in 2003 led to the collapse of public services and the armed forces - and was seen by many as fuelling the Sunni-led insurgency.

In an effort to defuse the sectarian violence and unite feuding political parties, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia, presented a national reconciliation plan to parliament in June 2006.

The initiative's 24 provisions included granting a general amnesty to militants who were not accused of killing anyone; reforming the deBa'athification process; releasing detainees accused of minor offences; disarming militias; and compensating families affected by terrorist attacks and American military operations.

Implementation of the plan, however, has been fraught with problems, such as the persistent security crisis and fierce disagreement between parties about the various provisions, particularly the pardoning of former rebels and their disarmament.

"One of the reasons for the failure of the national reconciliation is the failure of the national government to remain a unity government," said Jinan al-Ubaidi, member of parliament for the Shia Alliance list.

"Half the ruling coalition members have withdrawn."

Since its formation, al-Maliki's government has faced one challenge after another.

Shia nationalist party al-Fadhila left in March, followed by the Iraqi Accord Front in July and the political movement loyal to radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr a couple of months later.

The Iraqi Accord Front claimed the government was guilty of sectarianism while the two Shia parties said it didn't consult sufficiently.

Some have suggested that the political turbulence has not been helped by parties repeatedly changing their views on issues.

Abdul-Khaliq Zangana, member of parliament for the Kurdish list, explained that since democracy is new to Iraq, political positions frequently change, particularly on the contentious subject of reconciliation.

Others blame the government's piecemeal approach to reconciliation for the political discord. "[The government] was not serious about disarming militias and implementing an amnesty," said Saleem al-Jaburi of the Iraqi Accord Front.

However, following the improved security situation brought about by the American military surge and the reform of the debara'athification law, politicians and analysts are now more optimistic about reconciliation.

Zangana said that progress on reconciliation has actually contributed to greater stability, "It has created a space for many militants groups to put their arms aside and make peace."

He said bridge-building efforts were going nowhere last summer but, through the combined efforts of all those involved, the process has moved on.

"Six months ago, we hit a deadlock, but with the persistence of the political parties and national, international and United Nations efforts, the national reconciliation process has revived," he said.

In recent months, there has been increased cooperation between Iraq's political parties. In December 2007, the two main Kurdish parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK - signed a memorandum of understanding with the largest Sunni party, the Iraqi Islamic Party.

These developments have brought about changes in the political process and created a new environment for the parties to work to revive the reconciliation process. Indeed, a special conference on the former is to be held in Sharam al-Sheikh, Egypt, next month.

According to al-Abousi, there is also a chance that Sunni parties will return to government following the introduction of the accountability and justice law.

"If the government responds to our conditions which are a general amnesty, amendments to the accountability and justice law and an expansion of the power of the deputy prime ministers, then we will return to the government," he said.

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