

Shias Extend Control

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Religious groups are exploiting the power vacuum, raising the risk that Shia radicals could set the agenda in southern Iraq.

Shia religious parties and militias have stepped into the vacuum caused by the sudden fall of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq. Entire cities are not being patrolled by US troops, but rather by Shiite militiamen.

Although many middle- and working-class Iraqi Shias are secular-minded, they have no political parties or militias. The radicals are by no means the majority, but they are significant, and they have other kinds of power. They demand that Shia law be the law of the land, and some want clerical rule.

The militias are loyal to Shia clerics such as Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim of the Tehran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Muqtada al-Sadr of Najaf. US troops have begun attempting to block SCIRI fighters of the 10,000-strong Badr Brigade from coming back from Iran with their arms. Sadr gave a Friday sermon recently in which he is reported to have said that his followers are the only true believers. He has given his allegiance to Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri, an Iraqi exile in Qom who is one of the few Iraqi scholars to accept the Iranian notion that the clergy should rule.

The Sadr Movement and the SCIRI militias are important in cities like Baqubah, Kufa, Najaf, Kerbala, to some extent in Kut, and in the slums of east Baghdad. Since these towns and cities have a combined population of several million, they are not insignificant. There are reportedly no Marines in Baqubah, a city of some 300,000. Residents of the poor Shiite quarters of east Baghdad say they have not seen a US Army patrol for several days. Instead, some 6,000 Shiite militiamen loyal to Sadr patrol the neighbourhoods.

The dangers for Iraq of the rise of the Shia radicals are manifold.

Sunni Arabs and Kurds will resist the imposition on Iraq of Shia law. But in "town hall" meetings to choose local leaders and national representatives, radical Shia militia control may dictate the outcome. It is also possible that the Iraqi population will get tired of and annoyed with the American presence, and the radicals will be able to exploit that sentiment to catapult themselves to political leadership of the south.

The tribal chieftains and the villagers in the south are reportedly uninterested in radical clerical Shi'ism. But the radicals' popularity could well spread to the countryside if they gather enough momentum.

The paramilitaries of more radical groups have reportedly raided Ba'ath arms depots and are storing arms in mosques. It may be possible to roll these militias back, but there could be trouble about attempts to do so. The danger for the Americans is that Shias do have a certain amount of solidarity. If US troops shot a number of Sayyids - descendants of the Prophet Mohammed - in the course of putting down a riot, resentments could spread rapidly.

The rivals of Muqtada al-Sadr have suggested that his popularity will fade when security is restored, since he is young and does not have the standing to be a source of authoritative legal rulings. This view may underestimate this young cleric, who is in his early 20s. When his highly respected father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, was assassinated by the Ba'ath Party in 1999, Muqtada went underground and organized poor Shias in Najaf, Kufa and the Baghdad slums. His popularity among the poor does not seem impeded by his youth, and they do not care how many books he has written. For more formal religious authority, he now has the backing of Haeri.

The team of Sadr and Haeri has managed to place their men in key positions. Sheikh Mohammed al-Fartousi left Najaf for east Baghdad in mid-April and began preaching at one of the largest mosque congregations, Hikmah, attended by some 50,000 worshipers. He now says that he was sent by Haeri to take over that mosque. How many other large mosque congregations are being essentially usurped by Sadr emissaries? Note that Fartousi is supported by a neighbourhood militia of Sadr followers, and was briefly arrested by US troops for travelling with a firearm.

Many in the Bush administration seem to be counting on the greater moral authority of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf to keep the Shias in check. Sistani does not like the idea of clerics getting directly involved with government. But Sistani is just as committed to the imposition of Shia law on Iraq as the others. He has also given interviews suggesting that his patience with an American occupation force in Iraq could run out within the year. The ability of the Shia radicals to set an agenda for the south is not dependent merely on their numbers, and they should not be underestimated as a political force.

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