

Shias Make Case for Federalism

Author: [Daud Salman](#)

As constitutional talks continue, some in southern Iraq are pressing hard for autonomy.

Shia lawmakers are pushing for a regional government in southern Iraq modelled on Iraqi Kurdistan, saying after years of oppression under Saddam Hussein the region needs more independence.

In an attempt to preempt a strong central government, some in the National Assembly are proposing that the southeastern governorates of Basra, Missan and Thi Qar form their own administrative region, with its own parliament. Basra is home to Iraq's southern oil fields.

"We are demanding federalism for the south and to have fair distribution for the oil revenues," said Qasim Dawood from the Iraqi List.

Those who want autonomy like Ridha al-Khafajee, a senior member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, one of the main Shia parties that make up the United Iraqi Alliance list, says the southern regions are comprised mainly of Shias, and argues that if federalism is an option for Kurds then it should be available to all Iraqis.

The three northern governorates that make up Iraqi Kurdistan became a semi-autonomous region after the first Gulf War in 1991. Kurdistan has its own parliament and regional ministries.

But Sunnis want a more centralised government. Their opposition to federalism threatens to delay the constitution, which faces an August 15 deadline.

"I see no justification for federalism in the south," said Abdul Majeed Muheeb, a Sunni member of the parliamentary committee charged with drafting the constitution. "On the contrary, federalism will increase ethnic tensions and corruption."

As a result, there has been no agreement reached yet regarding federalism, a major obstacle in finishing the draft constitution.

"What has been agreed upon is a decentralised system that gives wider authority to the governorate councils," said Bahaa al-Aarajee, a member of the constitution committee and a representative of the United Iraqi Alliance list.

But residents of the south say they deserve more autonomy after the sufferings they faced under the former regime.

"We are eagerly waiting this decision and we always dreamt of this during the 1990s when Saddam and his followers oppressed us," said engineer Majid al-Hilali, a resident of Nasiriyah in Thi Qar province. "We support federalism for the south and to give the region wide authority."

Yaarub Abbas, a Missan governorate resident, said federalism would level the playing field for all the

regions.

“Giving more authority and freedom to the regional governments will have a democratic dimension that follows the principle of sharing the wealth of the country, especially with the oil revenues in the south,” he said.

But some southerners are cautious about the prospect of a decentralised system.

During a recent Friday prayers sermon, Imam Hussein al-Musawee of the Husseiniya mosque in Basra urged patience on the issue of more autonomy for southern Iraq.

Ali Lebee of Basra University, meanwhile, believes the country has other priorities.

“What is important now is the writing of the constitution so that it can be approved by the Iraqi people,” he said.

Daud Salman and Zaineb Naji are IWPR trainees.

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