

Sunni Arabs Fear Exclusion

Author: IWPR

By Jasim al-Sabawai in Tikrit (ICR No. 136, 10-Aug-05)

Now he has to work as a taxi driver, and he is hoping the new constitution will bring him the equality and justice he feels he's been deprived of since the fall of Saddam's government.

"If the constitution is fair and rallies all Iraqis together, then we will welcome it," said Zaydan. "But so far we don't know that it will be. We want a constitution that protects us and guarantees our rights."

In this predominately Sunni area near Saddam's home town of Tikrit, there is concern that regions which benefited under the former president's rule will not be treated equally under the new constitution.

"It should be devoted to the country and all people, not only the ruling group," said Juma Barak Awed, a medical assistant at the Beiji hospital, 30 kilometres east of Tikrit.

The constitution must be approved by the Iraqi National Assembly by August 15, and will then be put before voters in a referendum on October 15. However, major disagreements remain over federalism, the allocation of national revenues and other contentious issues.

"Iraqis are going through a very dangerous stage," said Abdullah Hussein Jabara, Tikrit's deputy governor, adding that he wants to see the drafting committee continue its work despite such setbacks as the deaths of two Sunni members who were shot recently in Baghdad.

"Sectarian feuds are being ignited from beyond our borders," he said. "But we Iraqis are one family tied together by historical bonds. We want the constitution to be genuine and to deepen those links."

That Sunnis do not have a stronger voice in drafting the constitution is to be expected, Jabara said. "It's a reflection of the number [of Sunnis] in the National Assembly due to the absence of active participation in the elections."

Sunnis largely boycotted the January poll, and there are only 17 in the 275-member Assembly. The committee drafting the constitution originally included two Sunnis, but after Sunni groups threatened to boycott the process, it was expanded by 15.

A particularly divisive constitutional issue for many Iraqis has been federalism and the amount of autonomy the provinces will enjoy.

The Kurds and some Shia are broadly in favour of a devolved federal arrangement, since Baghdad's relationship would then be with the large areas they inhabit in northern and southern Iraq, respectively, rather than the smaller individual governorates. But many Sunni Arab politicians are against the idea since their community might lose out.

Even in a Sunni heartland area like Tikrit, women's groups share the concerns of their counterparts

elsewhere about how their rights will be defined in the new constitution.

Suhad Fadhil Hameed, a member of Tikrit's provincial council, said the new law should ensure that women can participate in the political process. "Female participation is necessary because in the past we were marginalised and had no role in Iraqi society," she said. "Our current participation is enhancing our rights and standing."

Twenty-five per cent of National Assembly seats must be held by women, according to the interim constitution, the Transitional Administrative Law.

Hameed thinks it is a great achievement that Iraqi women are engaged in politics, and something that distinguishes them from their counterparts in many neighbouring countries.

Still, she is not optimistic about the part women will play in Iraq's future. "Even as a member of the provincial council, my role is not actively recognised by men," she said. "I am regarded as junior staff."

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