

Sunni Town Split Over Constitution

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Some reject the new document out of hand, while others welcome it conditionally or even wholeheartedly.

The signing of Iraq's new interim constitution has evoked widely differing responses – from celebrations in the Kurdish north to the angry protests that erupted in Baghdad and in the predominantly Shia south.

Reactions in Iraq's Sunni heartland have been mixed, judging by interviews conducted by IWPR in Falluja. Most people interviewed in the town condemned the new constitution, although some were for it.

Several Falluja residents said the document, agreed by the 25 members of the Coalition-appointed Governing Council, lacked any kind of legitimacy.

"The constitution serves only the Kurds' interests. It was drawn up by American politicians, and I'm under no obligation to follow it," said restaurant manager Furat Mohammed al-Khalidi, 26. "The Governing Council was not elected, nor did anyone vote on the constitution."

Generator salesman Dhiya Alwan, 32, was similarly hostile to the way the document was approved, "I was disturbed when I heard that the mercenaries of the Governing Council had signed this constitution.

"The old constitution gave us more rights. We had it for years and no one raided our homes, or gave the minority rights to which we must submit."

Dhiya Muhammad al-Ali, 36, the son of a tribal sheikh, said people in the area opposed the document but would seek to use a provision in it to block moves towards a permanent constitution.

"The Governing Council members do not represent us. They are not welcome here. How can I agree with a constitution made by someone who I do not recognise as a representative?" he said.

Referring to article 61 (C) that allows any three of Iraq's 18 governorates to veto the adoption of a permanent constitution, Ali said, "point C will cost [the Governing Council] a lot, because we will reject any future constitution."

The idea of using the provision for tactical purposes was also supported by Muhammad Hussein al-Balwa, a tribal leader in Falluja who sits on the provincial governing council.

Balwa credited Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, the leading Shia cleric whose objections briefly delayed the constitution's ratification, for leading the campaign against the document. "Sistani started the protests first, and he was then followed by the Sunni. We completely support him," he said.

Nonetheless, Balwa is in favour of the regional veto – the very clause Sistani objected to most of all as an obstacle to adopting a permanent constitution.

"The only item that serves our interests is point C," said Balwa. "I will exploit this to prevent the adoption of a constitution that goes against my will in the future."

Balwa was critical of the powers granted to the predominantly Kurdish area established after the 1991 Gulf War.

"The federalism which the Kurds are trying to apply is unfair," he said. "The northern cities do not belong to a particular nationality. There are cities full of Sunnis – did they get autonomy?"

But not everyone was against the change. Several interviewees in Falluja said that the constitution was a step towards ending the occupation.

"I trust those who wrote the constitution, and I'm very happy with it," said Ahmed Munthir, 25, a merchant who holds a bachelor's degree in political science. "We have to remember it is an interim constitution, not a permanent one, and it comes at a critical time when the Governing Council members are trying to get authority transferred to the Iraqis by any means."

"Point C is not a major obstacle," he added. "Many people don't understand federalism, but those who make the decisions know more than the rest, especially about the Kurdish demands... It's well-known that in politics, you can't get something without giving something away."

One tribal leader interviewed by IWPR, Sheikh Khaled Atwan al-Fahdawi, 75, urged people to support the constitution as a way of ensuring their rights are observed.

"The constitution is very good, despite all the noise being made by some of the Shia and their senior clerics. It gives the right of veto, and that is very important.

"I ask the people not to reject this constitution... Those who reject this constitution want to rule people, and will force upon them things they don't want when it comes time to write the permanent constitution."

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