

Sunnis Need Political Power

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An upcoming provincial council election is certain to turn a new page in Iraqi politics by boosting the representation of Iraq's once-powerful Sunni Arab minority.

Iraq seems to be moving forward these days. Its citizens are fed up with sectarianism and extremism, the violence is somewhat contained, foreign diplomats are returning to Baghdad and high oil prices are feeding the state treasury.

Amid the positive signs, the omission of Sunni Arabs from local councils remains a black mark on the process of political development.

Sunni Arabs largely boycotted the local elections held in January 2005, a stance which mostly shut them out of power in provinces where they have a strong presence, such as Diyala, Salahuddin and Anbar. In the Sunni stronghold of Nineveh in northwestern Iraq, for example, nearly two-thirds of the provincial council seats are held by Kurds.

As long as Iraq remains a country dominated by identity politics, Sunni Arabs need to be part of the equation in order for any decision not to be dismissed as irrelevant. Iraq is standing shakily on its own two feet and requires the Sunnis' full support. This fact has been recognised at national level in Iraq. Now it needs to be applied locally.

Sunnis currently hold power at a local level through the "Awakening Councils" – generally tribal groups supported by the United States to fight Sunni extremists like al-Qaeda in their own neighbourhoods and provinces.

The Awakening Councils – which were appointed, not elected, and are paid by the Americans – focus more on security than governance, which Iraq has needed in recent months. Now that security is improving, however, it is time to take the next step.

While many have managed to secure their home regions, some of the Awakening Councils are far from democratic and have been accused of running little fiefdoms and acting as militias. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has warned Sunni tribes that the arrangement will not last forever, and that weapons can ultimately be held only by Iraq's regular security forces.

Another reason why it is important for Sunnis to be elected is that local leaders in charge of provincial budgets will better represent the people's interests and be accountable to them.

Take Anbar, for instance, a Sunni Arab stronghold that was formerly a centre for the insurgency and al-Qaeda. The province was allocated 170 million US dollars in 2007 alone, yet only five per cent of the electorate took part in ballot which picked its provincial council, according to a report by the Los Angeles Times.

More money is expected to flow into the provinces as oil prices climb and Iraq begins the formidable task of

reconstructing local and national infrastructure.

American money will undoubtedly dry up as the United States' debt climbs to a record 9.6 trillion dollars, and Iraq will be expected to foot the bill for local projects – making it even more important for all Iraqis to be fairly represented at a local and national level.

One concern is that Sunni Arabs who are now willing to engage politically will turn to violence if elections are not held soon. Some election-related violence has already occurred, and there are fears that Sunnis could take up arms if the slow-moving provincial election law is not approved.

That law is now being held up in parliament by political bickering, particularly over the issue of whether it should include a power-sharing provision for council seats in the disputed city of Kirkuk. The delay is much to the disappointment of the Bush administration, which has made local elections one of Washington's benchmarks for Iraq.

At this point, it seems unlikely that the elections will be held this year.

But Iraqi elections cannot be held based on US or international demands and timetables. Washington's decision to push for local polls in 2005 regardless of which groups participated is one of the primary reasons the Sunnis aren't represented today. That lesson cannot be forgotten.

While Sunni political participation is key to sustaining even a weak democratic order, Iraqis themselves must be the ones who decide when to hold elections if these are to be relevant.

Kurds and Shias may not be thrilled at the prospect of sharing more power at local level – significantly, the government stalled on the elections for months – but the Sunnis have proven to be an important political force nationally.

Last month, Tawafik, the most powerful Sunni alliance, rejoined the Maliki government after the prime minister followed through on a promise to grant an amnesty to thousands of Sunni Arabs. The Sunni return to Maliki's cabinet was hailed as an important sign of reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation can and will continue as long as Sunnis are empowered in local politics. When that day comes, Iraq will be in a much stronger position to move forward.

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