

# Iraqi polls in limbo

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THE *Washington Post*, quoting an Iraqi regional newspaper reported on Monday that the entire 13 member election commission of Anbar province, that includes Fallujah and Ramadi, had resigned and gone into hiding. The Iraqi newspaper quoted the head of the commission, Saad Abdul Aziz Rawi, as saying that "it was impossible to hold elections in the province" and that officials who maintained otherwise "were kidding themselves".

This was perhaps the most telling indication of the success that the insurgents have had in intimidating Iraqi officials, and is only the latest in a series of events showing the unease of even those Sunnis who form part of the government about the timing of the elections and the poll process.

Sheikh Ghazi al-Yawar, the Iraqi president, who not long ago was feted at the White House by President Bush and who at that time was prepared to endorse the January 30 date for elections, has now said in an interview that escalating violence would make it difficult to hold proper elections. He maintained that many figures in the Iraqi government agreed with this but were not authorized to postpone the election which could only be done by the independent elec-

bly hopeful experience for the Iraqi people," and went on to add that he regarded the elections as an "historical marker for our Iraq policy." He has made it clear that from the perspective of his administration the question of postponing elections does not arise.

It can be said that the law under which the election is to be held does not permit postponement. It can also be said that any delay in the holding of polls would provoke a violent Shia reaction and possibly plunge Iraq into civil war, which is exactly what the insurgents want. It can be argued further that any concession at this time would be seen as a victory for the insurgents and would give fresh impetus to their recruitment drive and to their popular appeal.

These are, of course, weighty considerations but it would be wrong to assume that these problems cannot be worked out by the

pated that the number of attacks on American and coalition forces will go up from the current 70 a day to 85.

General Metz also conceded that in significant portions of four of Iraq's 18 provinces, the situation currently was not such as to permit the holding of elections. These provinces — Baghdad, Anbar Nineveh (where Mosul is situated) and Salahdin (Saddam's hometown of Tikrit is located here) comprise one third of Iraq's total area and are home to about 50 per cent of the population. This would suggest that not only the Sunnis, but a substantial part of the Shia population would also be disenfranchised. President Bush, while dismissing the significance of the current situation is these four provinces, was apparently not aware of or chose to ignore the weight these provinces have in Iraq.

Polling is to take place at some 9,000 stations. Security for these stations and the polling staff is to be provided by Iraqi security forces. At the last count, according to the CFR figures, they numbered 127,000 people as against the 274,000 that the Americans believe are needed for the country. Of the 12 categories into which these forces are divided only three — police 53,135, National Guard, 40,063, and the army, 4,414 — would appear to be suitable for election day duty. It has been conceded in report after report that their training leaves much to be desired as does their discipline and fighting spirit.

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He called upon the UN to assess whether the elections could be held as scheduled, pointing out that the purpose of the elections was to create an assembly that could draw up a constitution reflecting the aspirations of all the Iraqi people and that this would clearly be impossible if a large segment of the population remained unrepresented in this assembly.

President Yawar's interview followed a meeting in a Baghdad mosque of hundreds of Sunni leaders all of whom sought the postponement of elections. This, of course, was some time after the main Sunni party had announced its withdrawal from the election process. There is little room for doubt now that the Iraqi Sunnis are virtually unanimous in opposing the holding of the elections according to the present schedule. Many of them are also opposed to the format of the election which almost guarantees in the present conditions that the Sunnis will be under-represented.

On January 3, Prime Minister Allawi reportedly called President Bush, after a series of deadly incidents in Iraq that left more than 20 people dead, and discussed the "impediments" to the holding of elections. American sources insisted that he had not suggested a postponement of polls, but significantly it was the same day on which his defence minister speaking in Cairo had suggested just this. Since then, Prime Minister Allawi has reiterated his determination to hold elections as scheduled and has dismissed as personal views the suggestions for postponement coming from his cabinet colleagues or the Iraqi president.

He has also extended the "state of emergency" declared two months ago — to facilitate the attack on Fallujah — and has made it clear that his government would exercise the powers granted under the emergency proclamation to allow elections to go forward. Reports indicate that under these emergency powers, Iraqis will not be allowed to travel outside their home districts and a virtual state of siege will be created to prevent insurgency attacks on polling stations and election officials.

Allawi is being driven not by opinion within Iraq, though it is clear that the Shia parties would oppose any delay, but by that of President Bush who has turned a deaf ear to the many influential voices in Washington arguing for postponement and for a change in the format of the elections. Most prominent among them is Gen Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to the senior President Bush and one of the most respected Republican foreign policy experts.

He told a public policy group that "The Iraqi elections, rather than turning out to be a promising turning point, have the great potential for deepening the conflict". Asked to respond Mr. Bush replied: "Quite the opposite. I think elections will be such an incredi-

Iraqis if the Americans were to give them the green signal to do so. The main problem, however, is that President Bush, whose views are reinforced by his coterie of advisers, refuses to acknowledge that a mistake may have been made and to take the necessary corrective steps. Conspiracy theorists, of course, are also prepared to propound the thesis that flawed elections will lead to civil war and the break-up of Iraq. This is why the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration are insistent that elections be held on time.

Whatever the factors prompting Bush's obduracy, it does seem that elections are bound to go ahead on the scheduled dates. Every day media reports indicate that both the political and security situations in Iraq are deteriorating and that elections would be difficult to hold. But it would perhaps be useful to do a more detailed ground reality check. The prestigious American think tank, the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) puts together from various sources statistics about the situation in Iraq.

By January 7, according to this institute, American casualties amounted to 1,342 dead, of whom 1,056 were killed in action; 10,252 were wounded, of whom 4,856 returned to duty within 72 hours. In the four days that have passed since newspaper reports indicate that the American have suffered a further 12 fatalities and an unknown number of wounded.

So far, the casualty figures have not prompted a strong public reaction from American public opinion. Far too many have bought the Bush thesis that the war in Iraq is the war against terrorism. But there have been vociferous complaints about the quality of the equipment given to American troops. There have been reports that the head of the American army reserve force has said that as a result of the discriminatory use of his force it is rapidly degenerating into a "broken" force.

Now the Americans have to contend with the fact that if the Iraqis cannot handle security, the US army may have to have a permanent addition of 30,000 men at an annual cost of \$3 billion and that reservists may be required, despite the resentment this would create, to serve for periods longer than the current 24 months.

Again, according to the same think tank's collation of figures, insurgent attacks on coalition forces from May 2003 to December 16, 2004, numbered 17,140 — about 30 a day — while the estimated number of insurgents detained or killed was 32,000. Other reports indicate that in late 2003, when the insurgency started gathering momentum, the number of attacks averaged 50 a day and rose to more than 80 a day before tapering off in Ramadan this year. Now, according to General Metz, the commander of the American ground forces in Iraq, it is antici-

reted four-star general to Iraq to look at, among other things, the training programme and how it can be improved. Combine this with the fact that police chiefs in a number of cities are being targeted by the insurgents along with other senior Iraqi administrators — the killing of the Baghdad governor and Baghdad's deputy chief of police are examples — and it would appear extremely doubtful that these forces would suffice to provide the security needed. The Americans, however, have made it clear that their own troops will not be deployed for election duty and will be called to act only if there is a dire need to do so.

According to American estimates, as quoted by the CFR, there are about 20,000 Iraqi insurgents and about 3,000 foreign insurgents in Iraq located primarily in the Sunni triangle. According to the Iraqi intelligence chief, Major General Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahwani, as many as 30,000 well-trained terrorists are actively operating throughout Iraq at the behest of former regime leaders based in Syria. "They operate," he said in an interview to the London based Arabic newspaper *Sharq-Al-Awsat*, "mainly in the Sunni areas where they receive moral support from about 200,000 people." Is this number going to diminish in the 20 days that remain? There is reason to be sceptical.

The Iraqi intelligence chief also claimed that he had seen no changes in Syrian and Iranian policies following Iraqi accusations of interference and that, "the problems are still coming from these two countries because the borders are open and the support is going on to serve their interests."

While these are the two countries on which attention is focused and while it is probably true that Baathist leaders in Damascus are directing part of the insurgency, the fact is that sympathizers for the Iraqi Sunnis are far more numerous in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and there can be little doubt that the American pressure notwithstanding the governments in these two countries have not been able to stem the flow of resources to the insurgents from private Jordanian and Saudi sources.

The Americans were able to ensure that leaders from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia met in Saudi Arabia and urged the Sunnis in Iraq to participate in the elections. But whether this changed the sentiment of the man in the street in these countries is open to question.

The Americans are stepping up their anti-insurgency operations and their intelligence gathering capabilities are apparently being improved but given the ground reality spelt out above, it seems unlikely that this will make much of a difference in the 20 days that remain. The outlook is for continuing carnage and mayhem in Iraq and an election that few will accept as credible.