



IRAQIS PREPARE TO VOTE ON NEW CONSTITUTION

October 10, 2005

Millions of Iraqi voters are expected to go to the polls on Saturday to decide whether to support a constitution that Iraqi leaders hope will bring together the country's three main ethnic groups -- the Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites.

The referendum, as the vote is being called, asks voters to vote "yes" or "no" on the constitution, which Iraq's newly elected parliament authored with the help of American diplomats.

U.S. officials hope the vote will strengthen Iraq's fledgling democracy, but some analysts warn it could lead to outright civil war.

The elements of the constitution

The constitution calls for a federal, democratic Iraq and includes some of the following key elements:

- Elections are to be held every four years;
- Islam is the state religion and the main source of law, but religious freedom is guaranteed and no law overrules democracy or rights granted by the constitution;
- All Iraqis are equal and guaranteed the right to freedom of expression, press and assembly;
- Men and women have equal political rights;
- All forms of torture and inhumane treatment are banned;
- The Baath Party, once led by Saddam Hussein, is banned;
- Arabic and Kurdish are the country's official languages; and
- Oil and gas reserves are the property of all Iraqi people and revenues from oil are to be shared equally by the country's various regions.

A majority of Iraqis must vote "yes" in order for the document to become law and no more than two thirds of the voters in three of Iraq's 18 provinces can vote "no," or the referendum fails.

About 15.5 million of Iraq's 27 million citizens have registered to vote in the referendum, a slight increase from the 14.3 million that registered in January's parliamentary elections. About 8.5 million people actually voted in January.

Ethnic conflicts

Two of the main ethnic groups, the Kurds and Shiites, many of whom were terrorized and oppressed under Saddam Hussein's Sunni rule, are expected to vote "yes." They hope the constitution will give them a new, more independent voice in politics.

The two groups make up almost 80 percent of Iraq's population.

The minority Sunnis, about 20 percent of the population, are expected to vote "no."

They oppose the constitution's call for federalism -- the idea that the country will be ruled by one constitution but divided into separate, nearly independent regions.

Sunnis complain the document gives an unfair share of power and oil wealth to Kurds and Shiites who live in the oil-rich north and south.

With the help of U.S. mediators, Kurdish and Shiite leaders have been holding last-minute negotiations with Sunni leaders to try to win their support.

Iraq's future

If the constitution is successful, the document will be signed and the country will hold elections no later than Dec. 15 for a permanent parliament, which will stay in power for four years before another election is held.

If voters say "no" to the constitution, Iraqis would have to start all over again.

The current parliament would be dissolved, on Dec. 15 Iraqis would vote for a new temporary parliament, and that parliament would have until October 2006 to write and ratify a new constitution.

Either outcome could lead to violence, Iraqi officials fear.

A "yes" vote could result in increased attacks from angry Sunnis while a "no" vote could lead to mass protests and even civil war.

Polls are expected to open from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m. Saturday and the Iraqi Electoral Commission expects to announce the results of the referendum by Oct. 20.

Violence leading up to the vote

Already, over 300 people have been killed in Iraq in the past two weeks, much of the violence from attacks launched by Sunni-led insurgents hoping to scare people away from the polls.

The intimidation has worked in some areas of the country. As the United Nations began distributing copies of the draft constitution last week, many Iraqis did not want to be seen

accepting a copy, and some shopkeepers refused to distribute copies to their customers for fear of retaliation from insurgents.

In Haditha, in the western part of Iraq, insurgents have threatened residents with death if they vote in the referendum.

Iraqi officials have been forced to tighten security for Saturday's vote.

When polls open, an estimated 100,000 Iraqi police officers and soldiers will be on hand to protect voters. Another 160,000 foreign troops -- mostly Americans -- will provide backup to the Iraqis, the Reuters news service reported.

Other security measures include overnight curfews in the days leading up to the vote.

-- Compiled by Kristina Nwazota, NewsHour Extra

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