



CRS Report for Congress

Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks

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Summary

Iraq's political system, the result of a U.S.-supported election process, continues to be riven by sectarianism and ethnic and factional infighting. The Administration is expressing optimism that the passage of key laws in 2008, including a law to govern new provincial elections to held in early 2009, will heal remaining rifts and continue to reduce violence. See CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Elections and Constitutional Referendum in 2005

After about one year of occupation, the United States handed sovereignty to an appointed Iraqi government on June 28, 2004. In line with a March 8, 2004, "Transitional Administrative Law" (TAL), the first post-Saddam election was held on January 30, 2005, for a 275-seat transitional National Assembly (which formed an executive), four-year term provincial councils in all 18 provinces (41 seats per council; 51 for Baghdad), and a Kurdistan regional assembly (111 seats). The election system was proportional representation (closed list): voters chose among "political entities" (a party, a coalition of parties, or persons); 111 entities were on the national ballot, of which nine were multi-party coalitions. Sunni Arabs (20% of the overall population) boycotted, winning only 17 Assembly seats, and only one seat on Baghdad's council. Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, then at odds with U.S. forces, also boycotted, leaving his faction under-represented on provincial councils in the Shiite south and in Baghdad. The resulting government placed Shiites and Kurds in the most senior positions — Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani was President and Da'wa (Shiite party) leader Ibrahim al-Jafari was Prime Minister. Sunnis were Assembly speaker, deputy president, a deputy prime minister, and six ministers, including defense.

Permanent Constitution. The elected Assembly was to draft a constitution by August 15, 2005, to be put to a referendum by October 15, 2005, subject to veto by a two-thirds majority of voters in any three provinces. On May 10, 2005, a 55-member drafting committee was appointed, but with only two Sunni Arabs (15 Sunnis were later added as

full members and 10 as advisors). In August 2005, the talks produced a draft, providing for: a December 31, 2007, deadline to hold a referendum on whether Kirkuk (Tamim province) will join the Kurdish region (Article 140); designation of Islam “a main source” of legislation;¹ a 25% electoral goal for women (Article 47); families choosing which courts to use for family issues (Article 41); making only primary education mandatory (Article 34); and having Islamic law experts and civil law judges on the federal supreme court (Article 89). Many women opposed the two latter provisions as giving too much discretion to male family members. It made all orders of the U.S.-led occupation authority (Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA) applicable until amended (Article 126), and established a “Federation Council” (Article 62), a second chamber with its size and powers to be determined by subsequent law (not adopted to date).

The major disputes — still unresolved — centered on regional versus centralized power. The draft permitted two or more provinces together to form new autonomous “regions” — reaffirmed in passage of an October 2006 law on formation of regions. Article 117 allows “regions” to organize internal security forces, legitimizing the fielding the Kurds’ *peshmerga* militia (allowed by the TAL). Article 109 requires the central government to distribute oil and gas revenues from “current fields” in proportion to population, and gave regions a role in allocating revenues from new energy discoveries. Disputes over these concepts continue to hold up passage of national hydrocarbons legislation — Sunnis dominated areas of Iraq have few proven oil or gas deposits, and favor centralized control of oil revenues. The Kurds want to maintain maximum control of their own burgeoning oil sector.

With contentious provisions unresolved, Sunnis registered in large numbers (70%-85%) to try to defeat the constitution, prompting a U.S.-mediated agreement (October 11, 2005) providing for a panel to propose amendments within four months after a post-December 15 election government took office (Article 137), to be voted on within another two months (under the same rules as the October 15 referendum.) The Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salahuddin had a 97% and 82% “no” vote, respectively, but the constitution was adopted because Nineveh province only voted 55% “no,” missing the threshold for a “no” vote by a two-thirds majority in three provinces.

December 15, 2005 Elections. In the December 15, 2005 elections for a four-year government (in line with the schedule laid out in the TAL), each province contributed a predetermined number of seats to a “Council of Representatives” (COR) — a formula adopted to attract Sunni participation. Of the 275-seat body, 230 seats were allocated this way, with 45 “compensatory” seats for entities that would have won additional seats had the constituency been the whole nation. There were 361 political “entities,” including 19 multi-party coalitions, competing. As shown in the table, voters chose lists representing their sects and regions, and the Shiites and Kurds again emerged dominant. The COR was inaugurated on March 16, 2006, but wrangling ensued and Kurdish and other opposition caused the main Shiite bloc, the “United Iraqi Alliance” (UIA) to agree to another Da’wa figure, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, as Prime Minister. On April 22, the COR approved Talabani to continue as president. His two deputies are Adel Abd al-Mahdi (incumbent) of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Tariq al-Hashimi, leader of the Consensus Front (Iraqi Islamic Party). Another Consensus

¹ [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html>].

figure, the hardline Mahmoud Mashhadani (National Dialogue Council party), is COR speaker. Maliki won a COR vote for a 37-member cabinet (including himself and two deputy prime ministers) on May 20, 2006. Three key slots (Defense, Interior, and National Security) were not filled permanently until June 2006, due to infighting. Of the 37 posts, there were 19 Shiites; 9 Sunnis; 8 Kurds; and 1 Christian. Four were women.

Benchmarks, Reconciliation, and Provincial Elections

The 2005 elections did not resolve the grievances in Iraq's communities over their new positions in the post-Saddam power structure. In August 2006, the Administration and Iraq agreed on a series of "benchmarks" that, if adopted and implemented, might achieve political reconciliation. Under Section 1314 of a FY2007 supplemental appropriation (P.L. 110-28), "progress" on eighteen political and security benchmarks — as assessed in Administration reports due by July 15, 2007 and then September 15, 2007 — were required for the United States to provide \$1.5 billion in Economic Support Funds (ESF) to Iraq. The President used the waiver provision. The law also mandated an assessment by the GAO, by September 1, 2007, of the degree to which the benchmarks have been met, as well as an outside assessment of the Iraqi security forces (ISF).

The Administration, as expressed in the April 8 and 9, 2008, testimony of U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and a May 2008 informal, non-mandated Administration update on progress on the benchmarks, saw movement toward reconciliation, facilitated by a reduction in violence attributed largely to the U.S. "troop surge." The February 13, 2008 passage (unanimously, with 206 members voting) of two significant laws (amnesty law and provincial powers law) and the 2008 national budget represented breakthroughs, although U.S. officials say that the effects will depend on implementation. However, other assessments, including a June 2008 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO-08-837) say that these legislative moves have had limited effect in healing the rifts in Iraqi politics.

The Administration is counting on new provincial elections, which were planned for October 1, 2008, to continue the progress seen in 2008, particularly in the dramatic reduction in Sunni-Shiite violence. Those elections have been delayed by Kurdish restiveness over integrating Kirkuk and other disputed territories into the Kurdish controlled region. The dispute caused a presidential veto of the July 22, 2008 COR vote on the election law needed to hold provincial elections; the draft law provided for equal division of power in Kirkuk (between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans) until its status is finally resolved, prompting Kurdish opposition and subsequent communal strife in Kirkuk city. However, the blocs agreed to put aside the Kirkuk dispute and passed a provincial election law on September 24, 2008, providing for the provincial elections by January 31, 2009. The Administration believes that the elections will bring into the political structure the tribal leaders ("Awakening Councils") who, along with their 100,000 "Sons of Iraq" fighters, cooperate with U.S. forces against Al Qaeda in Iraq and help stabilize Sunni regions. The Awakening Movement is likely to show strength at the expense of the established Sunni parties currently in the COR.

Provincial elections could also move Moqtada al-Sadr's faction firmly into political competition and away from armed conflict against the mainstream Shiite parties. That conflict surged in late March 2008, when Maliki sent about 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to Basra to defeat Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi, or JAM, militia, as well as militias from

the Fadhila Party, and Tharallah, in the oil export hub. Major fighting ended with a reported Iran-brokered ceasefire on March 30, 2008. Critics viewed the action as Maliki's attempts to defeat Sadr in advance of the provincial elections. Subsequently, Basra and environs have been mostly normalized, Sunnis and Kurds rallied to support Maliki. Sadr has announced he would not field a separate election list but instead support Sadrists on other lists, and he has recast the JAM as a social and cultural movement.

Maliki's growing perceived strength has helped him rebuild his government. The pullout of the Consensus Front, the Sadr faction, and the bloc of former Prime Minister Iyad al-Allawi in 2007 left the cabinet with about 13 vacant seats out of a 37 seat cabinet. The return of the Consensus Front to the cabinet and the simultaneous filling of former Sadr cabinet seats with independent Shiites in July 2008, leaves the cabinet with only one vacancy (ministry of Justice). All blocs are participating in the COR. At the same time, Administration officials and outside experts are concerned that Maliki's new confidence could lead to reversals, for example by refusing to integrate the Sons of Iraq, and by demanding a timetable for U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraq as part of a U.S.-Iraq strategic agreement said to be in the final stages of negotiation.

Table 1. Election Results (January and December 2005)

Bloc/Party	Seats (Jan. 05)	Seats (Dec. 05)
United Iraqi Alliance (UIA, Shiite Islamist). Now 85 seats after departure of Fadilah (15 seats) and Sadr faction (28 seats) in 2007. Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim has 30; Da'wa Party (25 total: Maliki faction, 12, and Anizi faction, 13); independents (30).	140	128
Kurdistan Alliance - KDP (24); PUK (22); independents (7)	75	53
Iraqis List (secular, Allawi); added Communist and other mostly Sunni parties for Dec. vote.	40	25
Iraq Consensus Front. Main Sunni bloc; not in Jan. vote. Consists of Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, Tariq al-Hashimi, 26 seats); National Dialogue Council of Khalaf Ulayyan (7); General People's Congress of Adnan al-Dulaymi (7); independents (4).	—	44
National Iraqi Dialogue Front (Sunni, led by former Baathist Saleh al-Mutlak) Not in Jan. 2005 vote.	—	11
Kurdistan Islamic Group (Islamist Kurd) (votes with Kurdistan Alliance)	2	5
Iraqi National Congress (Chalabi). Was part of UIA list in Jan. 05 vote	—	0
Iraqis Party (Yawar, Sunni); Part of Allawi list in Dec. vote	5	—
Iraqi Turkomen Front (Turkomen, Kirkuk-based, pro-Turkey)	3	1
National Independent and Elites (Jan)/Risalyun (Message, Dec) pro-Sadr	3	2
People's Union (Communist, non-sectarian); on Allawi list in Dec. vote	2	—
Islamic Action (Shiite Islamist, Karbala)	2	0
National Democratic Alliance (non-sectarian, secular)	1	—
Rafidain National List (Assyrian Christian)	1	1
Liberation and Reconciliation Gathering (Umar al-Jabburi, Sunni, secular)	1	3
Ummah (Nation) Party. (Secular, Mithal al-Alusi, former INC activist)	0	1
Yazidi list (small Kurdish, heterodox religious minority in northern Iraq)	—	1

Number of polling places: January: 5,200; December: 6,200; Eligible voters: 14 million in January election; 15 million in October referendum and December; Turnout: January: 58% (8.5 million votes)/ October: 66% (10 million)/ December: 75% (12 million).

Table 2. Assessments of the Benchmarks

Benchmark	July 12 Admin. Report	GAO (Sept. 07)	Sept. 14 Admin. Report	Subsequent Actions and Assessments - May 2008 Administration report, June 2008 GAO report, International Compact with Iraq Review in June 2008, and U.S. Embassy Weekly Status Reports (and various press sources)
1. Forming Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) and completing review	(S) satisfactory	unmet	S	CRC continues debating 50 amendments regarding federal vs. regional powers and presidential powers; Kurds want Kirkuk issue settled before finalizing amendments. Sunnis want presidential council to have enhanced powers relative to prime minister. Some progress on technical, judicial issues. Deadlines for final recommendations repeatedly extended, now beyond latest May 2008 deadline.
2. Enacting and implementing laws on De-Baathification	(U) unsatisfact.	unmet	S	“Justice and Accountability Law” passed Jan. 12, 2008. Allows about 30,000 fourth ranking Baathists to regain their jobs, and 3,500 Baathists in top three party ranks would receive pensions. But, could allow for judicial prosecution of all ex-Baathists and to firing of about 7,000 ex-Baathists in post-Saddam security services, and bars ex-Saddam security personnel from regaining jobs. Some reports suggest some De-Baathification officials using the new law to purge political enemies or settle old scores.
3. Enacting and implementing oil laws that ensure equitable distribution of resources	U	unmet	U	Framework and three implementing laws stalled over Kurd-Arab disputes; only framework law has reached COR to date. Revenue being distributed equitably, and 2008 budget adopted February 13, 2008 maintains 17% revenue for KRG. Kurds and central government set up commission to resolve remaining disputes; U.S. Embassy says it expects near-term progress on revenue sharing law (an implementing law).
4. Enacting and implementing laws to form semi-autonomous regions	S	partly met	S	Regions law passed October 2006, with relatively low threshold (petition by 33% of provincial council members) to start process to form new regions, but main blocs agreed that law would take effect April 2008. August 2008: petition being circulated among some Basra residents (another way to start forming a region) to begin process of converting Basra province into a single province “region.
5. Enacting and implementing: (a) a law to establish a higher electoral commission, (b) provincial elections law; (c) a law to specify authorities of provincial bodies, and (d) set a date for provincial elections	S on (a) and U on the others	overall unmet; (a) met	S on (a) and (c)	Draft law stipulating powers of provincial governments adopted February 13, 2008, took effect April 2008. Election law required to implement elections adopted September 24, 2008. Puts aside issue of Kirkuk and disputed territories to a parliamentary committee to issue report by March 31, 2009. Provides for provincial elections by January 31, 2009; closed list voting; 25% quota for women on the councils; no elections in Kirkuk or the three KRG provinces; no religious symbols on ballots; and no set aside seats for Christian and other minorities. About 4 months preparation (registration, candidate vetting, ballot distribution) needed to implement election; registration updating begun.
6. Enacting and implementing legislation addressing amnesty for former insurgents	conditions do not allow rating	unmet	Same as July	Law to amnesty “non-terrorists” among 25,000 Iraq-held detainees passed February 13, 2008. Of 17,000 approved for release (mostly Sunnis and Sadrist Shiites), about 1,600 released to date by slow judicial process. 19,000 detainees held by U.S. not affected.
7. Enacting and implementing laws on militia disarmament	conditions do not allow rating	unmet	Same as July	Basra operation, discussed above, viewed by Bush Administration as move against militias. On April 9, 2008, Maliki demanded all militias disband as condition for their parties to participate in provincial elections. Law on militia demobilization stalled.

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8. Establishing political, media, economic, and services committee to support U.S. "surge"	S	met	met	No change. "Executive Steering Committee" works with U.S.-led forces.
9. Providing three trained and ready brigades to support U.S. surge	S	partly met	S	No change. Eight brigades assigned to assist the surge. Surge now ended.
10. Providing Iraqi commanders with authorities to make decisions, without political intervention, to pursue all extremists, including Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias	U	unmet	Mixed: S to pursue extremists U on political interference	No significant change. Still some U.S. concern over the Office of the Commander in Chief (part of Maliki's office) control over appointments to the ISF - favoring Shiites. Still, some politically-motivated leaders remain in ISF. In the past year, the commander of the National Police has fired over 5,000 officers for sectarian or politically-motivated behavior, and Ministry of Interior said to have been purged of sectarian administrators and their bodyguards. Increasing number of Sunnis now in command jobs.
11. Ensuring Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) providing even-handed enforcement of law	U	unmet	S on military, U on police	Administration interpreted Basra operation as effort by Maliki to enforce law even-handedly, but acknowledges continued militia influence and infiltration in some units.
12. Ensuring that the surge plan in Baghdad will not provide a safe haven for any outlaw, regardless of sectarian affiliation	S	partly met	S	No change. Administration sees ISF acting against JAM in Sadr City, and ethno-sectarian violence has fallen sharply in Baghdad.
13. (a) Reducing sectarian violence and (b) eliminating militia control of local security	Mixed. S on (a); U on (b)	unmet	same as July 12	Sectarian violence continues to drop, but Shiite militias still hold arms. 103,000 Sunni "Sons of Iraq," still distrusted as potential Sunni militiamen. Iraq government assumes payment of 54,000 Sons as of October 1, but opposes integrating more than about 20% into the ISF.
14. Establishing Baghdad joint security stations	S	met	S	No change. Over 50 joint security stations operating, more than the 33 planned.
15. Increasing ISF units capable of operating independently	U	unmet	U	Continuing but slow progress training ISF. U.S. officials say ISF likely unable to secure Iraq internally until 2009-2012; and against external threats not for several years thereafter. Basra operation initially exposed continued factionalism and poor leadership in ISF, but also ability to rapidly deploy.
16. Ensuring protection of minority parties in COR	S	met	S	No change. Rights of minority parties protected by Article 37 of constitution.
17. Allocating and spending \$10 billion in 2007 capital budget for reconstruction.	S	partly met	S	About 63% of the \$10 billion 2007 allocation for capital projects was spent. Another \$22 billion is in 2008 Iraqi budget, including August 2008 supplemental portion.
18. Ensuring that Iraqi authorities not making false accusations against ISF members	U	unmet	U	Some governmental recriminations against some ISF officers still observed.