

Allawi May Gain at Expense of Shiite Rivals in Iraq's Election

Jan. 28 (Bloomberg) -- Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi may gain the most support in the National Assembly election Jan. 30 because he appeals to all sides of the nation's religious and ethnic divisions, according to interviews with voters and the latest opinion poll.

Iraqis will elect a 275-member assembly that will choose a president and two vice presidents, who in turn will appoint a prime minister. Secular parties, including Allawi's Iraqi List coalition and the Kurdish Alliance, are likely to win the most seats.

"People have agreed it's in their interests to elect Allawi prime minister," said Rime Allaf, an Iraq analyst at Chatham House, a London foreign-policy institution that advises European governments. Many Iraqis "don't want a religious government."

A poll by the International Republican Institute, a nonpartisan U.S. research group, showed that almost 60 percent of Iraqis say Allawi, a Shiite, has been effective since taking office. The survey was based on 1,903 interviews from Nov. 24 to Dec. 5 and had a margin of error of three percentage points.

Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or Sciri, may be Allawi's main opponent, said analysts including Anthony Harris in Dubai, a former U.K. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. Sciri belongs to the 228-member United Iraqi Alliance, the main Shiite grouping.

Shiite Challengers

Allawi's other challengers are all Shiites and members of the United Iraqi Alliance that is endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the top Shiite cleric, said Zenaib al-Assam, the Middle East analyst at Exclusive Analysis, a risk forecasting company in London.

"The question is whether a Shia majority would see this as payback time for Sunni rule of so many decades," said William Cohen, who was former U.S. President Bill Clinton's defense secretary and now runs the Cohen Group consulting firm in Washington, in a telephone interview yesterday. "If so, there's more hardship and heartbreak coming."

Saddam Hussein, overthrown by U.S.-led forces in 2003, is a Sunni.

Iraqis in 14 countries start voting today in the first election since 1953, an event that President George W. Bush and Allawi say will foster democracy and help defeat the bloody insurgency that followed Saddam's ouster.

"I am going to vote for Allawi's list," said Imam Moustaffa, a mother of two from Baghdad who now lives in London. "I want to see him become prime minister." Moustaffa was one of 52 voters interviewed Jan. 17-21.

Nation First

Some candidates say they're determined to put national before ethnic interests.

"I've devoted all of my life as a Kurd, but I am Iraqi," said Zakia Hakki, of Annandale, Virginia, in an interview Jan. 21 about her run for a seat in the election. "Now we need to unify our efforts to build a new Iraq."

Hakki, who espoused Kurdish independence before and after fleeing Baghdad in 1996, is part of a slate that includes prominent Sunnis such as Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawar.

Still, religious and ethnic divisions will drive the poll, said Stephan Wolff, professor of Middle East politics at the University of Bath and a consultant to the U.K. Foreign Office. That means Shiites will get about 60 percent of the vote, and Kurdish parties, representing about 20 percent of Iraqis and other groups, will get the rest, he said in a Jan. 26 telephone interview.

Sunni Boycott?

The Shiite vote will be split between religious and secular parties, said Wolff. The main parties of the Sunni Iraqis, who comprise about 20 percent of the population, have called for a boycott. Iraq's largest Sunni party, the Iraqi Islamic Party, withdrew from the election Dec. 27, citing unfair and unsafe voting conditions.

Jaffar Bassam, spokesman in London for al-Sistani, the Shiite cleric, dismissed any suggestion that a Shiite-dominated government would craft a constitution that marginalizes Sunnis or Kurds.

"Since Shiites have never really had real power in Iraq, I don't see how anyone can foresee this happening," Bassam said by telephone. "Only regimes like the previous one made an issue out of Sunni versus Shiites, and it oppressed and persecuted Shiites."

Al-Sistani's influence at times rivaled that of the Iraqi and U.S. governments. He helped end an August standoff between the rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and government troops in Najaf, and he urged leaders to hold elections even as Iraqis faced daily shootings and bombings.

Chalabi, al-Jaafari

Other candidates for prime minister include Ahmed Chalabi, a former protege of the U.S. who unlike Allawi wasn't associated with Hussein's Baathist party in the 1970s. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, leader of the Dawa party, and interim finance minister Adel Abdel Mahdi are also contenders, said al-Assam of Exclusive Analysis in a Jan. 26 interview.

"The chances for Allawi getting elected are dependant on a hung jury, and if there isn't a clear preponderance in the assembly, then he will be seen as the one candidate everyone can agree on," Charles Kupchan, professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, said in a telephone interview on Jan. 25.

Allawi, born in 1945, is a secular Shiite who trained as a neurologist and served in the Baathist party as a young man. He fled Iraq in the 1970s after falling out with Hussein and spent the next 30 years in exile, battling to rid Iraq of the dictator. Last June, he was designated interim prime minister by the U.S.

Deals to Come

A total of 7,785 men and women have registered to run, representing 111 entities, including political parties and coalition and individual candidates. The outcome of the vote won't be known until at least Feb. 9, the Iraqi Independent Electoral Commission said.

"What we're going to move into is a period of backroom deals in smoke-filled rooms," said Jon Alterman, a Middle East analyst at the Center for Strategic &

International Studies in Washington and a former State Department adviser. "Scores of Iraqi political parties will struggle and make trades for influence."

Allawi's Iraqi List is a coalition of 233 candidates that includes several ministers in the interim government, such as Interior Minister Falah Al-Naqib, and the Sheikh of the Sunni Azza tribe, Nazar Habib Al-Khaizaran.

The party's slogan is "Strong Leadership, Safe Country," and it supports a full withdrawal of multinational troops only when the Iraqi Security Forces are able to "shatter and destroy terrorist cells throughout Iraq."

There were a total of 185 bombings in which more than 2 people were killed or injured between May 2003 and Jan. 21 this year, according to the Washington-based Brookings Institution. Those blasts killed 1,928 people. Targets since the beginning of the year have including the party headquarters of Sciri and of Allawi's Iraqi National Accord Party. Water plants and oil pipelines also were targeted, weakening an economy crippled by neglect and war.

To contact the reporter on this story:
Caroline Alexander in London at calexander1@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:
Peter Torday at ptorday@bloomberg.net

Published: January 27, 2005 19:09 EST
http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=10000087&sid=a.yHb3WIkQbM&refer=top_w