

POLITICS

Early Steps, Maybe, Toward a Democracy in Iraq

By IAN FISHER

BAGHDAD, Iraq, July 26 - Whether democracy is really coming to Iraq, or whether it is even possible here, seemed of no immediate concern to Dr. Ahmad Abu-Raghif, a physician in Baghdad. He was game anyway.

He showed up at a university hall here on Sunday with a good haircut, a blue suit and a big smile: the outfit of the office-seeker worldwide. He buttonholed 50 people, he said, at the grass-roots caucus, making the pitch for their votes.

"I explained myself to a lot of people," Dr. Abu-Raghif, 37, said before the voting began. "I have a Ph.D. I am a city council member. And I think I am a good candidate to win." Plus he had personal connections, which never hurt.

"Some of them are my patients," he confided.

His Western-style vote-corralling is part of what may become the birth of democracy in Iraq, something that never really existed here. As with much in Iraq since the American invasion, the experiment is at once inspiring and troubled, full of potential but not at all assured of success.

Caucuses like the one Dr. Abu-Raghif attended have been convening around Iraq to select roughly 1,000 delegates, who will hold a national conference in Baghdad in the next week.

The concrete goal of the conference is to vote - openly and freely - on a 100-seat transitional council that will oversee the government of Iyad Allawi, the interim prime minister, until national elections are held in January. But the conference is also meant to function as an opportunity for a national dialogue, in which for the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqis from all religions, regions and political and ethnic groups begin to discuss the way forward.

With widespread violence and fragmentation, that has turned out to be difficult, so much so that the United Nations is urging Iraq to postpone the conference at least briefly.

A thousand or more fledgling politicians make a tempting terror target, aside from the many logistical challenges - as basic as where everyone will sleep - that surround such a big event. But the major issue is that many groups considered crucial to any broad

national dialogue are refusing to take part, largely because they view the process as controlled by the United States.

Wamidh Nadhmi, a newspaper editor and a leader in two nationalist parties that are refusing to attend, said exercises like the conference seemed aimed more at "public opinion in America to tell them that authority was passed to the Iraqi people."

"This argument might help Mr. Bush in his election, but the change is very little in Iraq," he said. "We do not want to be part of this American solution."

In recent days United Nations officials have been urging the conference's organizers to postpone it to give more time to bring groups like Mr. Nadhmi's on board.

Others who have refused to attend but are considered major players include the Muslim Scholars Association, a relatively moderate group of Sunni Muslim clerics and intellectuals, and the rebel Shiite Muslim cleric Moktada al-Sadr, who has a large following among poor and angry Shiites.

Jamal Benomar, the United Nations diplomat who is advising Iraq on the conference, called it "a huge challenge" that "cannot be rushed." He said more time was needed to convince reluctant groups that they should join and to publicize the event more to lend it wider legitimacy.

"It is not just to delay it for the sake of delaying it," Mr. Benomar said. "That is not acceptable. If it is to make it more successful, and to minimize the risks, I think it is worth considering. But again, this is a national conference. It is an Iraqi conference, and it's up to the Iraqis to decide."

But Iraqi officials are balking at any delay. The transitional laws that created the new government and scheduled the elections for January also specified that the national conference was to take place by the end of July. Fuad Masum, the Iraqi official who is organizing the conference, said the credibility of the law, and thus the entire process of creating a permanent government, requires that it be held on time.

"The operation is proceeding forward," Mr. Masum said.

But he did not minimize the problems. "Naturally it's not an easy procedure," he said. "It is something practically new for Iraqis."

The idea of a national conference was floated last fall by many Iraqi leaders as a way that Iraqis themselves, rather than the American occupation, could choose a new government and do so in a broad and public way.

That remained the hope of some leaders here this spring as the former United Nations special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi worked with the United States and Iraqi leaders to craft an interim government to take sovereignty at the end of June.

But the ultimate compromise settled on an appointed government, with the conference to be held afterward. That deflated any hopes for a more powerful or immediate role for the conference, even if its specific task of appointing the transitional council remains important. The council, while unable to pass laws, will be able to veto government decisions, approve the 2005 budget and question Dr. Allawi.

In many ways, though, the conference is significant as a test of support for the new government and as an early glimpse of how Iraqis are trying to move forward in this experiment toward democracy.

One favorable sign is that several major groups that refused to take part in Dr. Allawi's government are now taking part in the national conference, thus endorsing at the least the process established in May by the United States and the United Nations. The most important are the various branches of the Dawa Islamic Party, the Shiite Muslim party that is the biggest in Iraq.

Khudar Jaafar al-Kuzai, the party's leader, said it could not endorse Dr. Allawi's government because it was appointed - "something that Iraqis reject," he said. This new conference, he said, is much closer to an election and may help prepare the nation for actual elections in January.

"We are very pleased to take part in this experiment," he said. "We want to live this experiment."

After 35 years of dictatorship under Mr. Hussein, the process is unlike anything most Iraqis have ever seen. The conference has two complicated stages, which started with the selection recently of 1,000 delegates from the nation's tribes, political parties and trade and artistic unions.

More than 500 of the delegates are being selected from the various regions by local caucuses, an exercise in the chaos of democracy that has struck some here with both surprise and anger.

The biggest problem so far, organizers say, is that among the groups that want to take part, there has been an almost unmanageable number of candidates. In Kut, a Shiite city south of Baghdad, 1,248 people competed for 22 seats. In Najaf, a city considered sacred by Shiites because of its shrines, there were 920 candidates for 20 seats, prompting complaints from Mr. Sadr's group and other leaders that the process was not inclusive or democratic enough.

At the caucus in Baghdad, one of four for this city of five million people, 436 people competed for 40 seats, 10 of which were set aside for women. Women are to hold 25 percent of the seats on the council.

In some ways the Baghdad caucus, held in an auditorium at Baghdad University, was a democrat's dream: candidates stood up with a microphone and nominated themselves

openly as men on stage wrote out their names in marker on whiteboards for everyone to see.

The most ambitious, like Dr. Abu-Raghif, worked the crowd, which was itself not elected but appointed by political parties, local government councils and aid groups. Voting was on pieces of paper, tucked into five wooden ballot boxes, and the counting was public.

"We have heard about the development of Europe, how they began with simple steps like this one," said Arian Said Kalaf, 59, a well-known poet and columnist in Iraq who was competing for a seat at the conference. "We want to follow the same track."

But others complained of disorganization, of secret deals, of candidates who were looking only to enrich themselves by becoming part of politics here - complaints, to be fair, that are often heard in democracies worldwide. Expectations here, though, are high.

"They have to put their country before themselves," complained Dchia Hamandi, 64, a merchant active in local affairs, who was also vying for a delegate's seat. "That's the most important thing. But 90 percent of these people put themselves first."

The challenges of the national conference, the date of which has not yet been announced, are even more daunting. The 1,000 delegates must whittle themselves down to a 100-member council. Of course, 22 of the seats are already taken by former members of the Iraqi Governing Council, which was appointed last year by American officials to help run the nation.

To be fully legitimate, Iraqis and foreign diplomats say, it must somehow squeeze in representatives of all of Iraq's 25 million people: every region; the Shiites, Sunni Arabs and Kurds, as well as Christians, Turkmen and other minorities; women; and various political parties.

It must try to do so, as the United Nations has worried, without the participation of several major Iraqi groups, some of which have ties to the violent insurgents but still address the issues most important here: violence, reconstruction, the justice system.

Perhaps most immediately, it must do so in an atmosphere of violence, in which insurgents have turned increasingly to kidnappings and assassinations of members of the new government.

"Imagine how worried I am about this big occasion," said Mr. Masum, the conference organizer.