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Subject: ISCI: the Big Loser in the provincial elections?

Iraqi election hints of troubles for Shiite giant

By BRIAN MURPHY
Associated Press Writer

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BAGHDAD — The biggest Shiite party in Iraq once appeared to hold all the political sway: control of the heartland, the backing of influential clerics and a foot in the government with ambitions to take full control.

But the days of wide-open horizons could be soon ending for the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, and replaced by important shifts that could be welcomed in Washington and scorned in Tehran.

The signs began to take shape Sunday with hints of the voter mood from provincial elections.

The broad message — built on Iraqi media projections and postelection interviews — was that the eventual results would punish religious-leaning factions such as the Supreme Council that are blamed for stoking sectarian violence, and reward secular parties seen capable of holding Iraq's relative calm.

The outcome of the provincial races will not directly effect Iraq's national policies or its balance between Washington's global power and Iran's regional muscle. But Shiite political trends are critically important in Iraq, where majority Shiites now hold sway after the fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime.

"There is a backlash from Iraqis against sectarian and religious politics," said Mustafa al-Ani, an Iraqi political analyst based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Although official results from Saturday's provincial elections are likely still days away,

the early outlines are humbling for The Supreme Council. The group had been considered a linchpin in Iraqi politics as a junior partner in the government that had near seamless political control in the Shiite south.

Some forecasts point to widespread losses for the party across the main Shiite provinces. The blows could include embarrassing stumbles in the key city of Basra and the spiritual center of Najaf — hailed as the future capital in the Supreme Council's dreams for an autonomous Shiite enclave.

In their place, the big election winners appear to be allies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, according to projections and interviews with political figures who spoke on condition of anonymity because official results are not posted.

It's a vivid lesson in Iraq's fluid politics.

A year ago, al-Maliki looked to be sinking. Shiite militiamen ruled cities such as Basra and parts of Baghdad and rockets were pouring into the protected Green Zone, which includes the U.S. Embassy and Iraq's parliament.

Al-Maliki — with apparent little advance coordination with the U.S. military — struck back. An offensive broke the militia control in Basra and elsewhere in the south. His reputation turned around.

And many voters appeared happy to reward his political backers in the elections for seats on provincial councils, which carry significant clout with authority over local business contracts, jobs and local security forces.

"Al-Maliki ended the militiamen's reign of terror," said Faisal Hamadi, 58, after voting in Basra. "For this he deserves our vote."

The Supreme Council, meanwhile, appeared to stagger under the weight of negative baggage.

It was accused of failing to deliver improvements to public services in the south. Also, its deep ties to Iran began to rub against Iraqis' nationalist sentiments.

The Supreme Council's leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, spent decades in Iran during Saddam's rule and was allowed an office-villa in downtown Tehran. After Saddam's fall, the Supreme Council was Iran's main political conduit into Iraq even though the group also developed ties with Washington.

Iran now could face limits on its influence in the south with the Supreme Council forced into a coalition or second-tier status — and also confront resistance from a stronger al-Maliki government seeking to curb Tehran's inroads.

A Supreme Council lawmaker, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, acknowledged the election mood was against them.

"We controlled most provinces in the south, so we were blamed for whatever went wrong there," he said.

"The elections gave us an indication of what will happen in the general election late this year," said the analyst al-Ani. "Those who lost in this election have nearly a year to learn their lesson and change their strategy. They know now where the Iraqis stand."

Nationwide turn out in the election was 51 percent, said Faraj al-Haidari, chairman of the election commission. The figure fell short of some optimistic predictions, but was overshadowed by a bigger achievement: no serious violence during the voting.

Turnout ranged from 40 percent in the Sunni-dominated Anbar province in western Iraq to 65 percent in the Salahuddin province, which includes the hometown of Saddam Hussein.

Final figures were not yet ready for the Baghdad area, but al-Haidari said initial reports placed it at about 40 percent. Some unconfirmed reports placed the turnout even lower in the northern city of Mosul, which is considered the last urban foothold for al-Qaida in Iraq.

The timing of the election also could have hurt the Supreme Council, falling at the beginning of a major Shiite religious pilgrimage that may have left some backers unable to vote.

After the election results are known, the deal making begins. Again, the Supreme Council could be left in the cold.

The political-militia movement of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has indicated it may be willing to strike deals with al-Maliki's allies on the councils. It would be a startling turnabout.

Just last year, al-Sadr was denouncing the government as it joined American forces to dismantle his Mahdi Army's main enclave in Baghdad.

"We have no red lines when it comes to al-Maliki's coalition," said Ayed al-Mayahi, al-Sadr's chief representative in Basra. "We are looking ahead and will not be shackled by what happened in the past."

Associated Press writers Sinan Salaheddin and Hamza Hendawi in Baghdad, and Qassim Abdul-Zahra in Basra contributed to this report.

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