

Turkmen join Arabs to stop referendum in Kirkuk

Agence France-Presse

Arab and Turkmen politicians in Iraq's northern Kirkuk province have banded together to try to block an impending referendum on the future status of the disputed oil-rich region.

Kurds, reckoned to form the majority of the province's 900,000 population, are eager to press on with the vote in the hope of removing direct control of the area from Baghdad and including it in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.

Political stalemate meant that Kirkuk took part neither in Iraqi provincial elections earlier this year nor Kurdish ones last month, but leaders of the province's minority Arab and Turkmen communities believe they may have found a way of breaking the deadlock.

They are seeking a national vote on a proposal to scrap the already-delayed Kirkuk referendum.

The Arab and Turkmen leaders have pledged to back proposed amendments that would remove Article 140 of Iraq's 2005 constitution, which required a referendum over the status of Kirkuk and a census to take place by the end of 2007.

Neither has taken place and the minorities say their validity has timed out.

If approved by lawmakers, the proposed amendments could be put to a nationwide plebiscite next January in tandem with the scheduled Iraqi general election, according to the state-run Al-Sabah newspaper.

The amendments are among around 100 changes to the constitution suggested by a parliamentary committee, the newspaper said.

"This issue is not in the hands of the Iraqi government or the regional government of Kurdistan, but is the responsibility of the federal parliament and it is the parliament that will decide," said Hassan Torman, vice-president of the Turkmen al-Aadala party.

If the amendments go to a universal vote, an absolute majority of Iraq's electors must back them for the measures to pass.

However, if two-third majorities reject the changes in at least three of Iraq's 18 provinces, they will fail, a clause which gives the autonomous Kurdish region and its three provinces an effective veto over any amendments.

And the Kurds, whose peshmerga forces already have a heavy presence in Kirkuk alongside the Iraqi army, are insisting the provincial referendum should still go ahead.

"Article 140 is constitutional and the Iraqi government is obliged to implement it," said Sherzad Adil, a senior Kurdish member of the provincial assembly.

"The delay in implementing it is the fault of the governments that followed the former regime and we hope the problems will be solved before the next (general) election" in January, he said.

The Arab and Turkmen-backed amendments will retain references to "normalization" of Kirkuk, a term meaning the resettlement of Kurds expelled from their homes by executed former dictator Saddam Hussein in a campaign of Arabisation.

"We must continue to compensate those who were displaced" by the Arabisation policies on humanitarian grounds, said Mohammed Khalil al-Juburi, head of the provincial council's Arab bloc.

Arabs and Turkmen nevertheless say that Kurdish population figures have been boosted by many moving to the province in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion that overthrew Saddam.

Peshmerga have expanded their areas of control in Iraq. The region's three provinces comprise around 40,000 square kilometers, but peshmerga have advanced into an additional 35,000 square kilometers, today's disputed areas, and have major presences in Kirkuk, Nineveh and Diyala provinces.

In a visit to the autonomous region on August 2, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said that Article 140 was "constitutional" but added that "the ultimate goal is to find a solution that preserves the various components of Iraqi society... in the framework of the Iraqi state."

At stake is control over the estimated 7.9 billion barrels of reserves in the massive Kirkuk oil field, the third biggest deposit in Iraq which overall has the world's third largest reserves.