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U.S. Tries to Give Moderates an Edge in Iraqi Elections

By EDWARD WONG

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Jan. 17 — As they head into a crucial meeting at the United Nations, American officials are struggling to cobble together an electoral process that will favor Iraqi moderates in the transfer of sovereignty just five and a half months away.

Complicating the task, the Americans feel pressure to satisfy a caldron of restive Shiites, Kurds hungering for autonomy and Sunni Arabs who fear being marginalized.

The most immediate pressure is coming from the most revered Shiite Muslim cleric in Iraq, who has demanded a general election for a transitional assembly by May 31. Such an election would be rushed and could lead to chaos, a senior official with the Coalition Provisional Authority said, allowing the most organized political groups — hard-line Islamic parties or, much less likely, splinters of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party — to seize power.

"There's not enough time for the moderates to organize," he added.

The political process favored by American officials calls for caucus-style elections for a transitional assembly that would then appoint an interim government by June 30. That arrangement was laid out in an agreement reached on Nov. 15 between the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council.

But in recent weeks, Shiite Muslim religious leaders and Kurdish politicians, among the strongest supporters of the American-led invasion, have jeopardized the blueprint by making vocal demands for political rights. In agreeing to meet

with United Nations officials and members of the Governing Council on Monday, Bush administration officials are desperately trying to keep that process on track and win international legitimacy for it.

The plan was most recently hobbled on Jan. 11, when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the influential Shiite cleric, renewed a call for direct elections. Now, American officials hope the United Nations can help the transfer by agreeing to play some sort of role in Iraq between now and June 30 that would legitimize the electoral process set up by the Americans, or at least some version close to it.

As many as 30,000 Shiites took to the streets of the southern city of Basra on Thursday to support Ayatollah Sistani's latest declaration. A general election would no doubt put many Shiite politicians into power because Shiites make up more than 60 percent of the population. Ayatollah Sistani also asserted that only a directly elected assembly could approve the interim constitution now being drafted by the Governing Council and any agreement to keep foreign soldiers in Iraq.

The senior coalition official said that getting both those documents in place was critical to ensuring a smooth transition. The Nov. 15 agreement states that the pact on the soldiers must be put in place by the provisional authority and Governing Council by the end of March. At the White House on Friday, L. Paul Bremer III, the top American administrator in Iraq, suggested that the United Nations had the expertise to help in the drafting of the interim constitution by the Governing Council, which is due by Feb. 28.

Last June, Ayatollah Sistani issued an edict saying the writers of a constitution had to be chosen by the Iraqi people, prompting American officials to scrap their original plans for drafting a permanent constitution.

Adnan Pachachi, the current Governing Council head and leader of the Iraqi delegation to the United Nations, said Thursday that Ayatollah Sistani seemed willing to compromise on the electoral process for the transitional assembly. He also implied that the United Nations could play a crucial role in reaching a settlement.

"What I understood is that he would prefer elections and he is perhaps not fully convinced yet that elections are not possible now," Mr. Pachachi said. "He would like to be persuaded that they're not possible now. I think that can be done."

A week ago, the reclusive Ayatollah Sistani dismissed a letter written by Secretary General Kofi Annan and delivered by

Mr. Pachachi that said direct elections were impossible given the June 30 deadline.

Imam Jalaladeen al-Sagheir, a deputy head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and a close associate of Ayatollah Sistani's, said in an interview that the ayatollah believed that Mr. Annan wrote his letter under pressure from the American government, and that he would listen only to a United Nations delegation willing to travel to Iraq. "What if a delegation from the U.N. says it's impossible to have elections, what will happen then?" Imam Sagheir said. "In that case, Ayatollah Sistani will change his opinion."

The possibility of sending such a delegation will be a crucial topic of discussion at the United Nations meeting, American and Iraqi officials said, adding that they expect Mr. Annan to send Lakhdar Brahimi, who has been the United Nations special envoy to Afghanistan.

In a meeting with the Governing Council on Wednesday, Mr. Bremer said he was open to exploring variations on the caucus-style method, a council member said. That came after Mr. Bremer sent an Iraqi-American envoy from his office to meet with Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf. Mr. Bremer insisted, though, that any changes to the electoral process would have to be made by Feb. 21, a week before the deadline for the interim constitution, the council member said.

Equally vexing for American officials is the Kurdish insistence on broad federalist powers. Since 1991, when the United States and Britain declared northern Iraq a no-flight zone, the large Kurdish region has enjoyed virtually autonomous rule. Its two governing parties, with the support of some Governing Council members, are now trying to get a binding agreement guaranteeing that the Kurdish region will remain a single autonomous area after the transfer of sovereignty.

But many American officials fear the consequences of dividing Iraq along ethnic lines, and Mr. Bremer has tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Kurdish leaders to back down.

Many of the Kurds, who make up a fifth of Iraq's 25 million people, say they are in a race against time to secure the guarantee of autonomy, because they worry that an interim government heavily dominated by Shiites — which could very well arise if American officials make big compromises to placate Ayatollah Sistani — will not bow to the requests of Iraq's minority groups.

Two major demands from the Kurdish parties seem particularly untenable to American officials and other Iraqi politicians: their claims to Kirkuk, a northern oil-rich city, and their desire to retain Kurdish militiamen, called pesh

merga.

"There is a degree of independence that is unique in Kurdistan, and we want to keep that," said Barham Salih, prime minister of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of the two main Kurdish parties.

The two parties have been in talks since the summer to unite their separate administrations of the Kurdish region into one regional government. Kurdish leaders are willing to turn over matters of foreign, monetary and national defense policies to an Iraqi national government, but want to keep all the other powers they hold now, Mr. Salih said.

Mr. Pachachi, though, said the Governing Council wanted to leave the details of a federalist state up to the writers of a permanent constitution due in 2005 rather than commit to them now. "We have agreed on federalism, but we have to discuss what kind of federal structure we want and its relation to the central government," he said.

The one major group that has not made itself heard yet — except through deadly attacks on coalition soldiers — is the disenfranchised Sunni Arabs. That group, a fifth of the population, held power in this area under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire and Mr. Hussein.

The task of speaking broadly for the Sunnis could fall to a recently-formed state council made up largely of Sunni clerics. It now has 160 members, including officials from the two Sunni Islamic parties on the Governing Council.

Though many Sunni Arabs bitterly oppose the American occupation, their best guarantee of retaining representation in the transitional assembly may be through the caucus-style elections.

"Anyone calling for a general election is trying to play a political card to claim they are the majority in this country," said Fakri al-Qaisi, founder of the state council. "How can you have fair and impartial elections under the occupation?"

John H. Cushman Jr. and Susan Sachs contributed reporting from Baghdad for this article.