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Feeling marginalized, some Iraq Sunnis eye autonomy

By Serena Chaudhry
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Anjad Abdul-Salam is one of a growing number of Iraqis who say a separate state for his fellow Sunni Muslims is the only way to stop the country sliding back into sectarian chaos.

Tensions between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims are rising after the United States pulled out the last of its troops on December 18, leaving the country run by a fragile unity government.

Hours after the exit, Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki sparked the worst political crisis in a year by announcing an arrest warrant for the Sunni vice president on charges he led death squads. The premier also tried to get his Sunni deputy fired.

Sunnis are a minority in Iraq but for decades held the reins of power under dictator Saddam Hussein. Many say they have felt marginalized since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam and paved the way for the rise of the Shi'ite majority.

Abdul-Salam, a Sunni economics graduate who runs a stationery shop in Baghdad, sees little hope in the future for his three children.

"Living in an Iraq where Shi'ites are controlling power and most key jobs while we are always looked at as followers of Saddam will not be tolerated," said Abdul-Salam, 38.

"Without autonomy, Iraq will hit rock bottom and civil war and endless political crises will not be averted. This is a message that all politicians should understand."

The crisis triggered by Maliki's move against Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi threatens a power-sharing government that includes the Shi'ite National Alliance, Sunni-backed Iraqiya and Kurdish lawmakers.

Politicians took nine months after an inconclusive election in 2010 to form what was called a "unity" government. Having Sunnis in the deal was seen as vital to heal sectarian wounds.

But on December 22, a few days after the political crisis erupted, bombings in mainly Shi'ite areas rocked Iraq's capital, killing 72 people.

A suicide car bomb at the interior ministry in Baghdad last Monday killed seven people. Police sources said authorities believed insurgents targeted the building in revenge for the arrest warrant for Hashemi.

"Sunni anger will be on the rise in the short-term, especially until the crisis is resolved in an orderly and consensual manner - which doesn't look likely at this point," said Ranj Alaaldin, a senior associate with Certus Intelligence.

"That's primarily because Maliki's actions look designed specifically for the purposes of targeting the Sunni community, (to) deprive them of two important representatives in government and two individuals who happen to be Maliki's biggest rivals in Baghdad."

RISING TENSIONS

Hashemi and Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq are both members of Iraqiya, a cross-sectarian bloc which rode strong Sunni support to first place in the 2010 parliamentary election.

But it failed to secure a majority and ended up joining an uneasy coalition under Maliki, who has been premier since 2006.

Discontent is widespread in Sunni strongholds like Diyala and Salahuddin provinces, which have demanded more autonomy.

The calls for autonomy risk fuelling further sectarian friction. Maliki has said autonomy could lead to bloodshed, but some senior Sunni leaders have come out in favor of it and parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi has described it as a constitutional right.

In September, tensions rose between Shi'ite-majority Kerbala province and Sunni-dominated Anbar when an ambush of Shi'ite pilgrims re-ignited an old feud over a disputed area of desert.

While the tensions have eased, Sunni tribal sheikhs in Anbar have complained they feel alienated by the central government.

"The way Maliki is dealing with his (supposed partners) is opening the window for sectarian strife. Maliki is using media to mobilize his Shi'ite followers against Sunni top leaders ... This is wrong, this is playing with fire while sitting beside a fuel tank," said Sheikh Daham al-Esawi from Anbar province.

Baghdad complains the tribes meddle in local government affairs and security officials say tribal spats have made the area vulnerable to a comeback by affiliates of al Qaeda.

"HASHEMI'S FOLLOWERS"

"We want to eliminate sectarianism. So I ask, why do they (politicians) want to bring it back ... All our problems are being caused by political wrangling," said 42-year-old herbal medicine specialist Um Bilal, a Sunni Muslim.

Some Sunnis say they are discriminated against when hunting for work. "When I apply for a job, the main questions they ask me are what my surname is and where I live," said 23-year-old unemployed college graduate Rasha, referring to two methods used to glean an Iraqi's sect without directly asking.

"When my dad used to talk about sectarianism, I always thought he was exaggerating ... (But now) I feel things will become worse and worse and worse. They think we are (Vice President)

Hashemi's followers and because of this, we should disappear," she said, declining to give her last name because of fears for her safety.