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# Basics of democracy include frustration

## Iraqi councils still feeling their way

By Thomas Frank  
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BAGHDAD — Nearly three years ago, Salam Hanoon was among those leading the effort to bring democracy to the Iraqi capital. He helped create one of the first municipal councils to represent thousands of people in his Baghdad neighborhood. But last week, Hanoon realized the agonizing inefficiency of his creation.

As his colleagues on the Karrada District Advisory Council lamented the dilapidated local streets, sewers and electrical service, Hanoon silently stood up, gathered his papers and went out for a break.

"It is useless to be here," Hanoon said, dragging on a cigarette moments later on a patio outside the district council office. "It's a waste of time when everyone talks about their problems. Everybody already knows the problems."

As Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition troops struggle to contain a deadly insurgency, a little-noticed battle is unfolding in meeting rooms across the country. Iraqis are trying, after decades of authoritarian rule, to learn fundamentals of democracy and take control of rebuilding efforts and governance now largely handled by the United States.

Empowering Iraqis to decide which

streets get paved and which power plants are rebuilt increasingly is seen as vital to stabilizing the country. "It builds confidence in government and drives a wedge between Iraqi people and terrorists and insurgents," says Daniel Speckhard, director of the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office, which has overseen the \$21 billion, U.S.-financed rebuilding of Iraq's infrastructure. "Most Iraqis think government is not responsive to them."

Hanoon said he wanted to change that when he began forming a district advisory council in the mostly Shiite Muslim, middle-class Karrada neighborhood two weeks after Saddam Hussein's regime fell. Despite his occasional frustrations, Hanoon said, the council has been able to get U.S. money to build new neighborhood health clinics and water-treatment plants, and he recently fixed 46 broken water pipes.

Mohammed al-Rubeiy, the council chairman, said the council's first vote in September 2003 was to seek money to repair 165 neighborhood schools "so people would see

some change."

Efforts to build local governments across Iraq started in 2003 when the U.S.-led occupying authority appointed community leaders to dozens of local district councils. Baghdad has 15 councils: nine inside the city of 5 million and six on the outskirts. Each has a couple dozen unpaid members.

The councils have no legislative, financial or administrative authority. They were



PHOTO BY ZAHID SAHIL, USA TODAY

**Job is to assess neighborhood needs:** Chairman Mohammed al-Rubeiy presides over a recent meeting of the Karrada District Advisory Council in Baghdad.

formed to assess neighborhood needs and seek funding from U.S. agencies, private organizations and, more recently, the Iraqi government. "We formulated this form of government because there was no government," said Master Sgt. Robert Young, who leads an Army civil-affairs team teaching Baghdad's councils basics of governance, such as the need to print a meeting agenda.

District councils existed under Saddam, but members were picked by the ruling Baath Party "to keep an eye on people and what they do," said Hussain al-Bahraini, Baghdad's deputy mayor.

Early last year, Iraqis elected councils for each of the country's 18 provinces. Those provincial councils, which get advice from the district councils, are at the heart of U.S. efforts to put Iraqis in charge of rebuilding.

Sunday, U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad announced the creation of a U.S.-led team to teach the Baghdad provincial

council how to solicit bids for a project, accept the best offer and manage a contract.

Other U.S.-led teams have been operating in three Iraqi provinces since November. Each province is expected to have its own team by this summer, Speckhard said.

It's part of an accelerated effort to put Iraqis in charge of reconstruction and replace Saddam's corrupt national government. The shift from centralized to decentralized government "is one of the most important transitions facing Iraq," Khalilzad said Sunday.

The transition is painstaking. At the Karrada District Advisory Council office, a former palace belonging to Saddam's daughter Hala, a sign reading "Please No Gifts" near the entrance suggests a new anti-bribery ethos. Inside the meeting room, council members ranted for an hour about the dangerous streets and the need for help from the national government, but

## U.S. death toll

As of Friday morning, 2,316 U.S. service-members and seven Defense Department civilians had been identified as having died in the war in Iraq: 1,821 from hostile action and 502 from non-combat-related incidents.

Latest Army deaths identified:

► **Staff Sgt. Brock A. Beery**, 30, White House, Tenn.; died Thursday when an improvised explosive device detonated near his truck in Habbaniyah; 123rd Armor Regiment, Army National Guard.

► **Sgt. 1st Class Randy D. McCaulley**, 44, Indiana, Pa.; died Thursday when his dismounted patrol came under small-arms fire in Habbaniyah; 28th Infantry Division.

► **Spc. Antoine J. McKinzie**, 25, Indianapolis; died Tuesday when his Humvee came under small-arms fire in Baghdad; 1st Armored Division.

Source: Defense Department

► **For details on each American killed in the Iraq war, go to the website [soldiers.usatoday.com](http://soldiers.usatoday.com)**

no one suggested taking any action. "That's not the Iraqi way," said Young, the Army adviser. "They just discuss it."

Some councils struggle for legitimacy. In Sadr City, a Shiite neighborhood controlled by radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the district council "is in an uphill fight because of (al-Sadr's) Mahdi militia and the authority they have over the people," Young said.

Despite this, Oliver Moss, a U.S. Embassy political officer who works with Baghdad's district councils, said he has seen few signs of hope. The Baghdad provincial council has no Sunni members because Sunnis boycotted the January 2005 elections. The council initially ignored Sunni neighborhoods when they suggested projects, forcing Moss to point out that they are supposed to represent all of Baghdad.

Now, Moss said, the council is seeking funding for Sunni neighborhoods. "They're just learning democracy," he said.