

## Interim City Council to Debut in Baghdad

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BAGHDAD — In occupied Iraq, the signature of L. Paul Bremer III is the law. According to Coalition Provisional Authority Regulation No. 1, as published in Vol. 44 of the Official Gazette of Iraq, the decrees of the U.S. administrator enter into effect the moment he signs them.

Today, however, a new "interim Baghdad City Council," as it is known by the U.S.-led administration, will meet for the first time. The assembly is the fruit of an ongoing experiment in American-style local democracy led by U.S. military officers such as Army Col. J.D. Johnson.

Johnson has spent several weeks meeting with local leaders in Baghdad — some picked by U.S. officers, others chosen in rowdy and enthusiastic neighborhood assemblies.

Together, the Iraqis, the colonel and other U.S. military and civilian officials have formed 88 neighborhood "advisory councils." The neighborhood councils in turn elected the members of nine district councils, who then elected the members of the Baghdad City Council.

The councils will not have the power to write laws or set budgets but will be the voice of ordinary Iraqis in dealings with U.S.-led authorities.

"In any process like the one we are beginning now, the most difficult thing is to begin," Johnson told the two dozen members of the Karada District Council, representing several Baghdad neighborhoods.

"We have no phone system, no media which makes it very difficult to organize our meetings," the Oklahoman told the Iraqis through an interpreter at a gathering Saturday evening. "But there is a burning desire to move on and establish a government."

Johnson sat at the head of a long table, presiding over an assembly of local leaders as diverse as any in this suffering, war-torn country — a woman wearing traditional head covering, a dentist and an engineer in button-down shirts, three tribal sheiks in robes and a Muslim cleric in a white turban.

Occupation officials acknowledge that not many Iraqis know the councils even exist. Indeed, at the Karada district meeting, the only audience consisted of an American reporter, his translator and a dozen sleep-deprived U.S. soldiers.

In general, American-created institutions and decrees here are greeted with varying degrees of

suspicion and indifference.

"What is the mechanism for choosing the members of the council?" one reporter from the nascent Iraqi press asked coalition officials at a recent news conference. "How are they appointed? Are they just a pretty covering for the Iraqi people while they wait for a real government?"

Nonetheless, more than 600 Baghdad residents have stepped forward to become members of the neighborhood, district and city councils. Many appear to be savoring their first taste of democratic rules and procedures.

"I hope I can help the people of Karada and all its neighborhoods," Sabah Mohammed Ali Jumah said in a brief speech to his fellow members of the district council, a pitch to be elected the council's chairman.

"I worked for the Ministry of Oil starting in 1958, but I was fired in 1979 after I quarreled with the minister," Jumah went on. "I was head of the association of Iraqi engineers in Basra. I hope you will be satisfied with my qualifications."

Jumah was elected vice chairman. The man he defeated in the race joined in the applause at the announcement of the result.

For the U.S. officials involved in the project, such small scenes of citizen participation are gratifying. "This has been a bottom-up governance program," said Andrew Morrison, deputy civil administrator for Baghdad. "It's involved thousands of residents of Baghdad."

Morrison and other U.S. officials take pains to specify that the councils will not be a government: They are an idea conceived by outsiders.

Iraqis will have to pick their own forms of government, Morrison said.

The interim councils will provide advice to the civilian and military authorities, Morrison said, "so we have a sense of what the people's needs are and their suggestions as to how we can solve their problems."

Nevertheless, the Americans involved in the project clearly see another element of their mission: passing on the basic values of their 2-century-old democracy.

"We're here to understand the democratic process and to discuss the matters that are important to the *baladiya*," Johnson told the Karada District Council, using the Arabic word for district. "This is the last time I will chair your meeting. From now on, the chairman you elect will run the meeting and will be responsible for the agenda."

The council elected its chairman and vice chairman. But there was a tie in the vote for an alternate to the City Council.

"It is not necessary to ask the American officer what to do next," the council member counting the votes said in Arabic. "We will simply vote again and choose between these two who are tied."

After the vote was completed, Johnson turned to the issue of neighborhood security and Iraqi complaints about abuses by U.S. troops during house searches for weapons. Would the members of the council, he asked, be willing to accompany the U.S. forces on the searches?

No, definitely not, council member Daffer Kadder said.

"For the time being, the Iraqi people think that every Iraqi who works with the Americans is a traitor or a spy," Kadder said. The presence of a council member standing beside American troops would only reinforce this idea, Kadder said.

The colonel dropped the idea.