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Iraq constitution may cut women's rights

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BAGHDAD - A chapter of Iraq's draft constitution obtained by the Associated Press on Monday gives Islam a major role in Iraqi civil law, raising concerns that women could lose rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance.

The proposal also appears to rule out non-governmental militias, an area addressed Monday by the new U.S. ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad. Urging Iraqis to build national institutions, he said there is no place for factional forces that "build the infrastructure for a future civil war."

The civil law section, one of six in Iraq's new charter, covers the rights and duties of citizens and public and private freedoms. The language in the chapter is not final, but members of the charter drafting committee said there is agreement on most of its wording.

Committee members have been rushing to complete the constitution so the Iraqi National Assembly can set the final wording by Aug. 15. Parliament's version would be put to a public vote by mid-October, and if approved, elections would follow by the year's end.

The drafting panel's efforts got a boost Monday when its 12 Sunni Arab members ended a boycott, easing fears the document might be rejected by the ethnic community at the heart of the insurgency.

Sunni Arab support is crucial because the charter can be scuttled if voters in three of Iraq's 18 provinces reject it by a two-thirds majority, and Sunni Arabs are a majority in four provinces. Sunni Arabs make up about 20 percent of Iraq's 27 million people but dominate areas where the insurgency is raging.

A Sunni member of the constitutional commission, Saleh al-Mutlaq, said that he and his 11 colleagues agreed to resume work after receiving assurances from the government that their grievances would be addressed. Those concerns included better security after last week's assassination of two colleagues, which triggered the boycott, and for an expanded role for the Sunni Arab minority in the constitutional deliberations.

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