THE ABUSE OF POWER IN THE IRAQI PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2010 FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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الخلاصة

يحاول البحث تقديم تحليل خطابي نقدي لإساءة استخدام السلطة في الانتخابات النيابية العراقية، على وجه الخصوص ، يهدف إلى التحقيق في سيطرة الأحزاب العراقية الأكثر قوة على الخطاب العام وتسليط الضوء على تأثير الخطاب على عقل وأفعال الأشخاص الأقل نفوذ. يعتمد التحليل على مقالين صحفيين ، أحدهما من صحيفة نيويورك تايمز الأمريكية ، والآخر من صحيفة غارديان البريطانية. استند إطار التحليل إلى استراتيجيات (فان ديك ٢٠٠٤) ، ويظهر التحليل أن الصحفيين استخدموا استراتيجيات استطراديه (خطابية) محددة في تغطية قضية الانتخابات العراقية لخدمة أهداف أساسية وأيديولوجيتهم المهيمنة.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to present a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the abuse of power in the Iraqi parliamentary elections. In particular, it aims to investigate the control of more powerful Iraqi parties on public discourse and highlight the influence of discourse on the mind and actions of less powerful people. The analysis draws upon two newspaper articles, one from US-New York Times newspaper, and the other from the British _Guardian newspaper. The analysis framework was based on Van Dijk's (2004) strategies. The analysis shows that particular discursive strategies were used by journalists in covering the Iraqi election issue to serve fundamental goals and their hegemonic ideology.

Keywords: the abuse of power, critical discourse analysis (CDA), Van Dijk's (2004) strategies

INTRODUCTION

According to Wodak & Meyer (2001), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a cross-discipline produced by scholars in the 1990s (Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, and Theo van Leeuwen). CDA shows language as a form of social practice and is concerned with investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. Blommaert & Bulcaen (2001:) believe that through (CDA) it is possible to invest language as a tool to achieve ideological purposes (p.). Van Dijk (1993) mentions that the main focus of CDA is on the structures of the text and the talk. Written and spoken language exercise their power through linguistic devices. Therefore, CDA intends to know how do speakers exhibit their power in discourse and to know what strategies and discursive structures are they use (p. 256). Moreover, CDA is considered as a theory and a method because it offers, in addition to the description and explanation of the relationship between language and society use, an explanation of how and why discourses work (Rogers, 2004 p.2). Another definition states that CDA is primarily concerned with analysing the vague as well as the transparent structural relationship of discrimination, dominance, power and control as it is manifested in the language (Wodak & Meyer, 2001 p.2). So, CDA's intention is not dedicated to studying the acceptable power enactment only, but also it analyzes the illegitimate exercise of the power abuse or dominance of the discourse (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 24). The take-off phase of CDA started after a symposium held in Amsterdam in January 1991. This symposium is supported by Amsterdam University. The participants of this symposium are considered the pioneers of CDA. Norman Fairclough, Teun Dijk, Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress and Ruth Wodak spent a couple of days discussing cooperatively the theories and methods that led specifically to CDA. It is worth mentioning that before the symposium at Amsterdam University, the network of CDA started through the launch of Van Dijk's journal which is "Discourse and Society" (1990). Besides, several books that share similar goals were simultaneously and coincidentally published. Yet, the Amsterdam University Symposium is considered the institutional start of CDA .

Subsequently, there have been new journals specialized in CDA such as "The Journal of Language and Politics, Visual Semiotics and Discourse Communication", as well as the emergence of e-journals that publish CDA researches such as "CADAAD". Moreover, book series specializing in CDA has been issued, meetings and conferences about CDA are held regularly and handbooks are ongoing. Finally, it is clear that CDA has become a discipline institutionalized in many curricula and departments around the world (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3-4. Hence, the control of more powerful Iraqi parties on public discourse and investigate the influence of their discourse on the mind and action of less powerful people.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate the strategies used by the journalists to report about the Iraqi election and show the effect of such usage of strategies on readers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are discussed in this paper.

1. What strategies do journalists use to report the Iraqi election?
2. What is the effect of using these strategies on readers?

PRINCIPLES OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Recently, there has been a lot of considerable discussion regarding the principles of CDA and how to propose research goals for the discipline. Here, we mention just a few of the principles that have been proposed. In fact, researchers are tied to the discourse group of the same social group they are investigating either as members or as observes of it. They often have similar opinions to the subjects in the discourse that is under analysis. As a result, the researchers must be highly critical of their own roles in the social structure and be willing to express their own viewpoints on the research issue. The critical discourse analyst does not try the same type of objectivity that is sometimes claimed by scientists or linguists, but recognizes that such objectivity seems to be impossible due to the nature of their experience. Instead, they are critical of their own position. Ethical practices are essential. Observing and recording social behaviour is seen to be an extremely sensitive issue. Permission must be obtained, and issues about the perversity of individuals or named institutions must be explored. This is particularly true in circumstances involving publication. The majority of critical discourse analysis accepts a variety of perspectives. The decline is still new and contributions both to the theory and practice have come from a wide range of sources. Furthermore, it is a truly international project that includes contributions from many countries and many cultures all over the world. Therefore, it is difficult to define the boundaries of CDA as a discipline.

Some scholars have highlighted key areas of social change in which CDA can play an essential part. For example, Teun Van Dijk's study focuses on racism, Norman Fairclough focuses on issues related to global capitalism (or new capitalism), and Robert deBeaugrande's focuses on ecological issues.

The concept that discourse is a crucial aspect of power and control is at the heart of CDA. In today's culture, power is held by both institutions and individuals, and any challenge to the status quo is a threat to those in positions of power. As a result, a commitment to social quality, fairness, and justice is a problem for those responsible for sustaining disparities, unfairness, and justice in contemporary society, and it must be a primary concern for those who question the status quo.

Sometimes the word critical can be misleading. In common usage, it is frequently used to express disapproval, as in "the chair of the government is really critical of the headteacher" implying that the chair believes the head is failing to run the school successfully.

It is more commonly used in CDA in the sense of critique, implying that analysis can sometimes be directed toward a beneficial conclusion, such as studies of successful resistance texts (like those written in the USA in the 1960s during the ant- racial discrimination movements).

AIMS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (PDA) AND OTHER RELATED ISSUES

The purpose of political analysis is to utilize linguistic tools to identify and explain distortions and mystifications in terms of their social and historical origins. Thompson (1989) claims that PDA concentrates on a text's ideological meaning. Analyzing the manner in which meaning contributes to maintaining dominance relations is the goal of studying ideology in a text. The primary goal of PDA is to educate people about the many forms of language used for diverse political purposes. Our common sense is frequently influenced by power dynamics. As a result, the dominant political discourse in society concretizes the designation of people as oppressors and oppressed. This kind of discourse is produced and utilized by the gatekeepers of the truth. According to Fairclough (1995), it must be an important objective of language education to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others. Consciousness is the first step to emancipation. In other words, power relations organize ideological structures; therefore, they are slanting towards a particular group of the society. Ideological structures are therefore those slanting (biased) ruling ideas that become a part of people's common senses, while they serve as the assumptions of a particular class and usually the ruling class.

Critical analysis of language involves analysis of the ideological properties. This has made the notion of ideology a central issue in CDA. Critical discourse analysis, however, has not as yet arrived at a unanimous definition of the concept still, a comparison of the available theoretical and practical approaches to ideology tends to indicate a prevalent disposition towards ideology with a more political sense of ideology which also reflects the conscious nature of language use in society rather than with the general sense of world view especially with an unconscious significance which renders all language users innocent of any charge of language abuse and which, therefore, devoids ideology of its critical edge. Ideology in this political or critical sense is chiefly concerned with certain notions which are central to CDA in general such as asymmetrical social relations of power, control, purposeful distortion of reality through language, manipulation, deception, and frequently the concept of class and the role it plays in the above processes.

For example, Volosinov (1973), who presented the first linguistics theory of "ideology," defines ideology as "a class war manifested in linguistic indications that penetrates all language use" (reported in Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 262). However, Hodge and Kress (1993) distinguish between two sorts of ideology. The first type of ideology they introduce is basically identical to "neutral ideology" or "worldview," as defined by Fairclough (1995). Hodge and Kress define language as the practical but partial and false awareness of society, coining the term "consciousness ideology" in part based on Whorf's conceptions of "science" and "metaphysics." "Ideology is defined as a systematic set of concepts arranged from a certain point of view," says the author. They go on to say that ideology is a subsuming category that comprises sciences and metaphysics, as well as numerous political ideologies, without implying anything about their position and dependability as guides to reality (p.6).

However, language is a means of control and manipulation as well as communication, it is held to be "ideological in another, more political, sense of that word: it involves systematic distortion in the service of class interest"(ibid). Yet, according to the authors, the two kinds of ideology are not entirely distinct. They are comparable in that both of them involve systemization from a point of view. They differ in that the latter," political ideology is liable to project fantasy versions of reality, but [the former global or neutral ideology which they call] sciences deals in hypothetical constructs whose status is not always so very different"(ibid).

Besides the above affinity, Hodge and Kress's (1993) practice throughout the book displays their emphases on and preoccupation with the political ideology. This can be understood from the writers' treatment of the main concepts of CDA such as power, class, classification, control, mystification, etc. for instance, the distortions of languages are somehow attributed to class society (ibid: 7) Or, a classification which is " at the basis of language and thought" is said to be "an instrument of control intension and struggle" between individuals and grouping to sustain or undermine power relation (ibid: 63-64).

Fairclough (1995), however, identified the use of ideology in a numeral way, as virtually synonymous with the worldview, which an indirect attaches against ideological critique. Adopting a rather political or, as he calls it, critical approach towards ideology, he says" what makes a theory critical is that it takes a "pejorative" view of ideology as a means through which asymmetrical social relations of power are reproduced" (1995: 17).

This is, according to Fairclough, the critical significance of ideology. Commenting on the restricted use of the role of the ideology and those of power relations (e.g., class power in traditional Marxism, hegemony in neo-Marxism, and gender relations of power), Fairclough stresses that " I believe it is misleading to class relations) without attention to their functioning within the social and (therefore to gender interests with class, ethnicity, etc.)" (1995:18).

Elsewhere, elaborating on the scope and functions of the concept of ideology, as well as distinguishing this type of ideology from global or neutral ideology. Discoursal practices, according to Fairclough (1995) are ideologically engaged in the sense that they contribute to the maintenance or understanding of power relations. Power relations can be influenced by discursive practices in any sort of speech, including scientific and theoretical discourse. This does not imply, however, that all discourse is transcended by dominant relationships, and that because we humans are capable of transcending such civilizations, we are also capable of transcending ideology. Hence, I do not accept the view of ideology in general as a form of social cement that is inseparable from the society itself (p.82).

Underscoring the distorting and neutralizing function of ideology, Fairclough adds, "ideology works, as Althusser reminds us, by distinguishing its ideology becomes naturalized, automatized "coming sense" in Gramsci's terms"(ibid). Van Dijik (2001), however, takes a somehow different stance on ideology. Adopting a socio-cognitive approach, he defines ideologies "as those systems of general beliefs that are at the basis of the social representation groups, much in the same way as axioms are at the basis of a formal theory. Ideologies, thus, are the "social axioms" that ground the specific knowledge and attitudes of social groups"(1998). Accordingly, to him dominated groups and classes, as well as the dominant ones, may have a better understanding, some frameworks and the related disciplines and applications need to be elaborated on Van Dijk's strategies.

THE STUDY

DATA COLLECTION

This paper presents an analysis of the strategies used by journalists and their effect on readers concerning the Iraqi parliamentary elections 2010 from the perspectives of critical discourse analysis

(CDA). This paper uses an analysis of two newspaper articles on **the Iraqi parliamentary elections 2010.** One of these newspaper articles is taken randomly from the US _New York Times newspaper, November 19th, 2009 issued in the US, and the other is taken from the British _Guardian newspaper, November 9th, 2009. The method of analysis used in this study is based on Van Dijk's (2004) framework of strategies as shown below.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The analysis of the two newspaper articles is according to Van Dijk's (2004) framework and to be noted here, that not all Van Dijk's strategies are present or used by writers of the articles. The prescience of those strategies is determined by the nature and type of subject matter discussed by the writers. In the analysis of the two newspaper articles, the following strategies are adopted to be discussed in this research:

"Actor description (meaning) --+"
"Authority (argumentation)"
"Burden (topos)"
"Categorization (meaning)"
"Comparison (meaning, argumentation)"
"Consensus (political strategies) --+"
"Counterfactuals (meaning, argumentation) --+"
"Disclaimers (meaning)"
"Euphemism (rhetoric, meaning)"
"Evidentiality (meaning, argumentation)"
"Example/ illustration (argumentation) --+"
"Generalization(meaning, argumentation)"
"Hyperbole (rhetoric) --+"
"Implication (meaning)"
"Irony (rhetoric) --+"
"Lexicalization(style) –"
"Metaphor (meaning, rhetoric) --+"
"National self-Glorification(meaning)"
"Negative other- Presentation (semantic macro strategy)"
"Norm expression"
"Number game (rhetoric, argumentation)"
"Polarization, US- Them categorization (meaning)"
"Positive self - presentation (semantic macro strategy)"
"Populism (political strategy)"
"Presupposition (meaning) --+"
"Victimization (meaning)"

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE FRAMEWORK

To enhance the usefulness of analysis, this paper presents an analytical category to each strategy used by the writer in both newspaper articles as discussed by Van Dijk (2004). The way actors are described in conversation will be determined by our ideologies. As a result, if we divide them into ingroups and outgroups members, we will describe ingroup members in a positive or in a neutral way, and outgroup members in a negative way. Similarly, in our own group, we will alleviate the description of members and in others, we will emphasize the negative characteristics.

"Consensus (political strategies) is one of the political strategies when the country is threatened is to insist on cross-party or national consensus" (ibid).

Counterfactuals (meaning, argumentation) is the labour opposition uses a typical expression of a counterfactual as "what would happen, if …" to suggest that the conservation try to imagine what it would be like if they were in asylum seekers situation that is in related to the move of asking for empathy. Example/ illustration (argumentation) giving concrete examples, demonstrating vignettes and short stories, making general points reasonable, plausible and probable are the powerful move in argumentation. Altogether the more concrete the story is the better it will be memorized and the more emotional, argumentative and persuasive it will be.

Hyperbole/ exaggeration (rhetoric). Hyperboles are rhetorical devices that are used to enhance and exaggerate meaning. In fact, by using especial metaphors especially when using the strategy of positive self-

presentation and negative other presentation we may expect that bad actions or prosperities of the others be expressed in hyperbolic terms, and vice versa.

Irony (rhetoric). Accusations are more effective in the forms of irony than when they are stated directly. A variety of ironies are distinguishable in the mutual critique and attacks of conservatives and Labour. On the other hand in debates of immigration, irony derogates asylum seekers as a "sudden discovery" that can be a shame.

Lexicalization (style). In contrast with liberal immigrations politics negative expressions signify asylum seekers or refugees in conversational discourse. To conclude lexicalization can be an overall ideological strategy for negative other presentations. Moreover, according to the position, role, goals, idea, point of view and opinion of the speaker and with specific lexical- items the debates on asylum seekers expressed.

Metaphor (meaning, rhetoric) is more persuasive than semantic-rhetorical figures, especially in debates on immigration, they are referred to as refugees, their arrival and unstoppable, the threat of immigration. Moreover, in the unfavourable semantic realm of metaphors, people are described in the term of disgusting, repulsive and revolting animals.

Presupposition (meaning) is frequently do not express discourses meanings, in other words, discourse meaning is almost inferable from sociocultural knowledge when the presuppositions are mostly used to presuppose the truth when they are not established.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presents particular strategies used by journalists and shows their effect on the readers through covering the most debatable issue of the Iraqi parliamentary elections.

1. CDA OF THE FIRST TEXT: IRAQI'S ELECTION HOPS

"The new law paving the way for national elections, including participation in Kirkuk, is welcome - but don't call it a milestone".

The writer's attitude in the first sentence above is contradictory with the public opinion of Iraqi's (counterfactuals strategy) through the use of metaphor "milestone". He disregards the importance of elections as a great event in the political life of Iraq. Here, the strategy of consensus is employed to show the debate over the election law. This is reinforced by exaggeration or hyperbole since a superlative adjective is used here "the much-debated" to disclose the importance of election for Iraqis. The ideological function of presupposition has also been utilized here. The debate or the election law presupposes the critical and complicated era that Iraqis pass through. This is not only because, as the writer says, "the country is slowly recovering from the terrorist attacks that killed at least 200 and wounded hundreds more a couple of weeks back in Baghdad", but also the political conflict of the parties which enhanced the sectarian terrorism. Further delays would have handed a Variety to the "terrorists"; but what type of terrorists is meant here? Those of Al-Qaeda – media used to shed light upon; or those of Jaishel-Mahdi or those of Kurd's Paish-Marga … etc. what about neighbouring countries … Do they want to rail or "derail" elections? For the part of the reader, this might be considered irony as it is not the first or last attack on Baghdad. There are countless examples of terrorist attacks on other places in Iraq. The word "terrorist" in this context is debatable. What does this word refer to? It is widely known that it refers to the Sunni groups as this word presupposes, 11 September attacks and the political events caused by these attacks of which American Invasion to Afghanistan. Consequently, it is used in Iraq especially by Shitti groups namely politicians as they have power in both the Iraqi Government and Parliament.

According to the writer, a victory would be handed to Kurds, this presupposes another shackle that will lead to "inflaming political instability and sparking ethno-sectarian violence" leading to dividing the country according to ethno-sectarian standards. The political division in Iraq had terrorism into appearance. In the sixth paragraph:

"President Obama may hail the new law and the elections as an important "milestone" but it is important to maintain perspective, and history should teach him to use the word warily. The Iraqi parliament still remains incapable of solving the main issues despite the countless milestones we have had in the past, and even in this instance, it took pressure from external forces including the Americans, British and Turks before the election law was passed. America's scheduled withdrawal is therefore by no means a certainty".

The writer shows the American stance represented by President Obama that he "may hail the new law and the election as an important" milestone". The writer shows contrast in this paragraph with the first sentence of this article when he calls reader not to consider the elections as ' a milestone", but for the president Obama, American stance, it may be ' a milestone". This also presupposes that America's scheduled

withdrawal. To conclude what is important is that the vote will go ahead with the confidence of the vast majority of Iraqis. But unfortunately, this is against what is there in reality. The difficulty is there where Kirkuk issue is mentioned by the writer as an example of the shackles that might confront elections.

2. CDA OF TEXT 2: IRAQI ELECTIONS PLAN IS THROWN INTO DOUBT

In this article, many examples and descriptions are given depending on example and description strategies, to show the different views of Iraqi political parties over elections and Mr Hashemi's (vice-president of Iraqi republic) veto. This veto sparked the ethno-sectarian conflict over power represented by the main three powers, Sunni, Shiite and Kurds. These stances will definitely affect the reader especially the Iraqi reader as it is difficult to predict what is going on under these political issues.

The writer depends highly on consensus strategy. He conveys many announcements of Iraqi politicians on the debate between them over Mr Hashemi's veto of the newly passed election law. The writer of the text one stresses the role of a terrorist in derailing the vote. In the second text, the matter is different in the sense that nothing is predictable in Iraq political field. Now the conflict is between politicians themselves who are different even on the legitimacy of Mr Hashimi's veto. On a sectarian basis, some of them say that it is constitutionally questionable, "Iraq's prime minister, Nuri Kamil Almaliki (Prime minister) condemned it as constitutionally questionable". Others support the veto as being legitimate. This presupposes that Iraqi politicians are less experienced in managing political affairs. What is there inside the parliament threatens the future of Iraq. Politicians are accusing each other on a sectarian basis. Bahaa al Araji, head of parliament's legal committee who belongs to the Shiite party accusing Mr Hashimi of "backing a Baathist agenda, since backers of Saddam Hussein's government oppose the elections".

The US supported national elections as a "prerequisite for withdrawing America troops", "however, the top American commander in Iraq, Gen. Kay Odierno" played down the threat, saying that it was "unclear what the veto meant but that the drawdown could proceed in scheduled despite delays in the election". This is the policy of "the big lie" raised many times by America. What about the security circumstances regarding the terrorists' threading, for example, there is at least the political argument or conflict of Iraqi politicians.

Many times "American officials state that their existence in Iraq is governed by the security situations other than the scheduled withdrawal.

CONCLUSION

This study shows particular discursive strategies adopted by journalists in covering the Iraqi election issue to serve fundamental goals and their hegemonic ideology. It explored that the competition among political parties and blocs is based on sectarian pillars to win the voters sympathy against other parties. A number of various ideological ways that try to mobilize voters against their will by relying on certain manipulation strategies as Van Dijk describes them: Because manipulation is usually discursive and involves power abuse, it should be studied by critical discourse analysis (Van Dijik 2005). This paper revealed that the lack of political consensus in Iraq led to spark the ethno-sectarian conflict over power represented by the three powers, Shiite, Kurds, and Sunni.

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(March 10th, 2010).

APPENDIX

TEXT (1)

Iraq's Election Hopes By Raaj Alaaldin November 9, 2009

The new law paving the way for national elections, including participation in Kirkuk, is welcome - but don't call it a milestone

Yesterday Iraqi parliamentarians finally voted on and passed the much-debated new election law that paves the way for national elections to be held in January.

The passing of the new law comes at a critical point for Iraq. The country is slowly recovering from the terrorist attacks that killed at least 200 and wounded hundreds more a couple of weeks back in Baghdad. Further delays to the new law coming into force would have led to the postponement of the elections beyond January since the Iraqi electoral commission needs three months to organise the elections - beyond the Iraqi parliament's constitutionally mandated term, which expires after January.

This would have handed a decisive victory to the terrorists. Their objectives still include derailing the elections, inflaming political instability and sparking ethno-sectarian violence - having an Iraqi parliament operate in a constitutional vacuum would almost certainly have created an environment conducive to this agenda. That the elections will go ahead under the new law is also important because it implements the popular open-list voting system, which puts constituents before the party and replaces party patronage with democratic accountability.

For the first time since 2005, elections will be held in Kirkuk just like in any other governorate, a victory for the Kurds who vehemently fought against giving the governorate any special status. There will therefore be no guaranteed seats for Arabs and Turkomen. Although the votes could be subject to a special review if it is determined that there was more than a 5% increase in the voter register from 2004 to 2009 (non-Kurds contend the demographic makeup of the area has been altered), the Kurds managed to win the right to have the same arrangement for other governorates deemed to have been subjected to demographic alterations. President Obama may hail the new law and the elections as an important "milestone" but it is important to maintain perspective, and history should teach him to use the word warily. The Iraqi parliament still remains incapable of solving the main issues despite the countless milestones we have had in the past,

and even in this instance, it took pressure from external forces including the Americans, British and Turks before the election law was passed. America's scheduled withdrawal is therefore by no means a certainty.

Furthermore, it is difficult to dismiss the problems the "special review" mechanism might bring about in a place as sensitive and hotly disputed as Kirkuk, which could have its future status influenced to some degree by the outcome of the elections. The Kirkuk issue continues to be recklessly kicked down the road only for it to later explode into a violent and irreparable conflict.

For now, what is important is that the vote will go ahead with the full support and confidence of the vast majority of Iraqis and sets the stage for what promises to be a tantalising democratic affair that for once may pit truly cross-sectarian alliances against one another.

B- TEXT (II)

Iraqi Election Plan is thrown into Doubt
By Rod Nordland & Riyadh Mohammed
November 19th 2009

Iraq was thrown into a fresh political crisis on Wednesday after a vice president vetoed a newly passed election law, delaying the vote, setting off fresh sectarian wrangling and possibly complicating plans to withdraw American troops.

In a move that caught American officials by surprise, one of two vice presidents, Tariq al-Hashemi, said Wednesday that he had vetoed the new election law the night before; he had threatened a veto but the Americans did not expect him to follow through. Shortly afterwards, the chief executive of Iraq's United Nations-supported electoral commission said in an interview for the first time that the elections would have to be delayed.

The veto touched off a political explosion. Iraq's prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, condemned it as constitutionally questionable, while President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, warned that delaying the elections risked creating a constitutional vacuum during which the Iraqi government would lose its legitimacy.

"Parliament could amend this law in a day," Mr Hashemi said. "We have no time to lose." But with Kurdish leaders also objecting to provisions of the law, a much more protracted debate in Parliament is likely. Kurdish leaders also want a greater share of parliamentary seats and on Tuesday had threatened to boycott the elections unless their demand was met.

The United States has consistently pushed national elections both as an important step toward reconciling still yawning Iraqi political divisions and as a prerequisite for withdrawing American troops. A postponement could affect the schedule, since American military officials had said they would begin a major drawdown a month or two after elections originally set for Jan. 18.

On Wednesday, however, the top American commander in Iraq, Gen. Ray Odierno, played down the threat, saying that it was "unclear" what the veto meant but that the drawdown could proceed as scheduled despite delays in the election date.

"I think we are set up and are flexible enough between now and the first of May, frankly," General Odierno said at a news conference that was apparently originally convened to praise Iraq's progress toward elections. "So I feel very confident that we don't need to make any decisions until the late spring."

The United States has about 120,000 troops in Iraq, a number that President Obama has pledged to reduce to 50,000 by next August, a major logistical undertaking.

Iraq's Presidency Council is made up of both of Iraq's vice presidents, one a Sunni, the other a Shiite, and the president, who is a Kurd. Under Iraq's Constitution, all three must approve any law passed by Parliament. Mr Talabani said he was unhappy with the election law, too, but was ready to sign it to avoid further delays. Mr Hashemi, the Sunni vice president, said he objected to a clause giving only 5 per cent of the seats in Parliament to minorities and Iraqi refugees abroad. Iraq has a population of at least 25 million, of whom 2 million - 8 per cent - have fled abroad, according to United Nations figures.

Ibrahim al-Sumydaie, a political analyst here, said he believed that Mr Hashemi's veto was motivated at least in part by political ambitions; he has been expected to announce that he will join an electoral coalition with two politicians who have large constituencies among Iraqis who live abroad. Baha al-Araji, head of Parliament's legal committee, suggested that Mr Hashemi was backing a Baathist agenda since backers of Saddam Hussein's government oppose the elections.

"That's absolutely not true," said a spokesman for Mr Hashemi, Shakir Kitab. Mr Kitab called the vice president's motivations to include in the vote more of the Iraqis who fled to live abroad "humanitarian and patriotic."

Hamdiya al-Husseini, the head of Iraq's Independent Election Commission, said in a telephone interview that the elections would have to be delayed at least one day for every day it took to pass the election law, which has been postponed 11 times since the election commission's original deadline of Oct. 15.

Publicly, American officials expressed concern rather than alarm. "We're disappointed about the developments today concerning the election law," said Philip Frayne, a spokesman for the United States Embassy in Baghdad. "We really hope a quick resolution can be found so the elections can proceed in January."

Mr Hashemi insisted that Parliament could quickly amend the law, and he said that election officials had assured him they could still prepare for the vote in time.

However, Mrs Husseini denied that Mr Hashemi had been given such assurances. "We now have only 60 days, and according to the Constitution we must have an election law approved by the presidency within 60 days of the election," she said.

Iraqi officials suggested that the veto would not survive a constitutional challenge. "This veto is absolutely illegal and unconstitutional," said Tariq Harb, a prominent Iraqi constitutional lawyer. Mr Maliki, in a strongly worded statement issued by his office, called the veto "a dangerous challenge to the political and democratic system." He added that the veto "was not based on a solid constitutional foundation and did not pay any attention to the national good."

Ali al-Moussawi, an adviser to the prime minister, said Mr Hashemi's veto was unconstitutional because all decisions by the Presidency Council have to be unanimous. He expressed hope that the vice president would reverse his veto to avoid a challenge in Iraq's highest court. Mr Maliki cannot override the veto under Iraq's Constitution, but it could be appealed to the court, or possibly to Parliament. It is unclear how independent Iraq's judiciary is.

Mr Maliki called for the electoral commission to continue its preparations for elections on Jan. 18. Mrs Husseini, however, said that without an election law, the commission had to suspend preparations for the vote, since it would not even be able to prepare ballots until it knew how many seats there would be.