BAGHDAD, Iraq - As Iraq's National Assembly prepares to approve a new draft constitution as early as Wednesday, legal experts and some political leaders have warned that the charter's explicit endorsement of Islam could give religious hardliners a tight grasp over a country that was once one of the Middle East's most secular.

In an effort to strike a compromise between the nation's religious and secular communities, Iraq's proposed constitution reserves a central place for Islamic law in the legal system while attempting to safeguard personal freedoms and democracy. But the text's ambiguous language and conflicting provisions left neither side particularly happy, and the document likely will be the subject of heated debate in Iraqi courts for years to come.

For instance, the constitution makes Islam the "official religion" of Iraq and "a" main source of legislation rather than "the" source, as many Shiite conservatives sought. But secular leaders remain concerned about a clause that prohibits any law that "contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam." Critics fear the provision could be used by religious hardliners to impose strict Islamic law, such as banning alcohol, restricting women's rights and imposing harsh Koranic punishments, such as stoning.

At the same time, the text calls for gender equality and privacy rights and prohibits laws that contradict democracy or "basic freedoms" guaranteed by the constitution.

"It's not a workable document."

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, an Islamic scholar and law professor at Emory University, said Wednesday.

"They brushed their differences under the carpet and crafted language that they could vote for. It's a time bomb that will explode as soon as it's enacted."

Peter W. Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador to Croatia who advised Kurdish politicians on the constitution, said the draft falls well short of the kind of democratic government the Bush administration hoped to install in Iraq.

"The U.S. now has to recognize that they overthrew Saddam Hussein to replace him with a pro-Iranian state," Galbraith said.

"The problem is that there are no agreements on these questions," he said.

"It allows any cleric to make his own interpretation of the law and opens the door to a whole range of abuses."