

Shaping a new Iraq: The stakes in this election are large

BY GEORGE ANDERSON

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While Canadians gripe about the inconvenience of a winter election, Iraqis go to the polls on December 15 in a truly grim environment of suicide bombs and kidnappings. In fact, the dire security situation—where every day seems to bring another appalling act of slaughter—has so dominated news coverage that these important elections have gone virtually unreported in the Western press.

The United States and its allies have staked a lot on seeing a functioning and legitimate political process established. It is part of any strategy for sapping the strength of the insurgency and paving the way for orderly withdrawal. It has been a bumpy road so far. The elections last January were largely boycotted by Sunnis and produced a government dominated by sectarian Shias and secular Kurds. Together, those two groups forced through their model of a new constitution, which was approved in October over the overwhelming opposition of the Sunnis.

Now, there are elections under this new constitution. What was meant to be the last step in the transition to a legitimate Iraqi regime is proving just one more way-station along a tortured path whose ultimate destination is far from clear.

Despite the endless bloodshed, Iraq—a country with no tradition of democratic politics—has made progress. This is a minor miracle, given that virtually all who participate in the political process—candidates, party workers, election officials and voters themselves—put themselves at some degree of risk and there will certainly be scores of politically motivated murders during these elections. I was in Baghdad last July, and the sight of wreaths in memory of slain members who occupied various seats in the national assembly brought home the hard realities of their politics and the courage of so many Iraqis. It is remarkable that 21 coalitions and more than 200 political entities have registered for this election, and that there have been several thousand political meetings all over the country.

This election is expected to see a much greater Sunni participation because key leaders have concluded they need representation in the national assembly. (As well, a revised proportional representation system based on individual governorates will give Sunnis many more seats even if their turnout is low.)

There is a tendency to see Iraqi politics as a simple contest between Shias, Kurds and Sunnis. In fact, each of these communities is internally divided, as can be seen in their competing parties. There are also some major cross-sectarian coalitions, notably former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National List, which brings together largely secular groups. Finally, there are various parties rooted in the smaller religious and ethnic minorities.

The main victor in the January election was the Shia-based United Iraqi Alliance. It has now lost both Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress and the Iraqi Hezbollah, while being joined by the notorious Moqtada al-Sadr, the boss of Sadr city in Baghdad and head of his own brutal militia. (Even this can be seen as progress, compared with the politics of the gun.)

Most observers expect the election to produce quite a different national assembly. Look for fewer sectarian Shias, more secular members from cross community coalitions, and more Sunnis. Even the Kurdish representation could see some erosion in the overwhelming dominance of the parties led by Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. The smaller minorities, such as the Turkomen and Chaldians, might have a stronger voice.

While the political process in Iraq has made some real progress, after the elections there will be two critical, and closely linked, questions. Will there be a new dynamic that is more inclusive of the Sunnis? Will some of the major weaknesses in the constitution be addressed?

While the Arab Sunnis are less than 20 per cent of the population, they were dominant in Iraq throughout the twentieth century and in Saddam Hussein's Baath party. Sunni areas are strongholds of the insurgency. Bringing them into the political process and accommodating them in some way is necessary, though

far from sufficient, for reducing support for the insurgency. However, not all Sunnis want in and many other Iraqis are happy to see this reversal of fortune.

Just before the referendum there was a last minute gesture to the Sunnis, who overwhelmingly oppose the current constitution. It provides for a new committee to be struck to review the constitution once the new government is in place. It will have four months to reach its recommendations and could lead to another referendum on proposed changes. In addition, Iraq needs up to one hundred pieces of new legislation to implement the new constitution and this legislation will be central in determining the nature of the new regime.

I recently attended a UN conference on the Iraqi constitution. There is no doubt it needs improvement. The current version was done in an incredibly compressed few weeks. There are many incoherencies and loose ends. Its basic architecture is an extremely decentralized form of federalism, which was the key Kurdish objective. To general surprise, the Shia leadership signed on to this approach at the last minute, seemingly because they were attracted by the idea of creating a new Shia-dominated super-region that could have half the population and most of Iraq's enormous oil and gas potential.

Sunnis, who are a majority in only three governorates – all of them oil-poor – fear that a highly decentralized Iraq could leave them impoverished and the country enfeebled. Many Shia, too, are worried about its implications. Baghdad, with a quarter of the population and little oil, would be seriously at risk. However, the Kurds can be expected to resist any lessening of the virtually sovereign powers they have negotiated for their region.

One area of possible compromise might be the rules on the creation of new regions, especially to prevent the creation of a Shia super-region. A second could be on establishing equitable rules for sharing oil and gas revenues, which could give comfort to the poorer areas. A third, more difficult but very important, would be to give the federal government greater powers over oil and gas and economic policy. Finally, there could be new provisions to ensure each religious or ethnic community has a real place in central institutions and to ease up further on “de-Baathification”, which the Sunnis feel targets them. None of this will be easy, but key actors in Iraq have advanced their understanding of constitutional

issues since they rushed into the last summer's deal, and the elections may shift political weights towards groups favouring some adjustments.

The stakes in this election are large. Its results and the shape of the new governing coalition will be important next steps in the development of political life in Iraq. They will be also first indication of whether Iraq will develop a more coherent and inclusive political regime that can help address the country's daunting problems.

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