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National Assembly Elections: Prelude to Democracy or Instability?

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[The following text was not part of the roundtable.]

The Iraqi National Assembly elections of January 30, 2005, constitute an event of historical significance. Not since the June 1954 parliamentary elections have Iraqis had the freedom to vote in national elections.³⁸ Despite insurgent threats that “the streets would run with blood,” millions of eligible Iraqis went to the polls and cast their votes.³⁹

Indeed, the election turnout reached almost 60 percent, high by any international standard. Conducting these elections was highly significant for Iraq, but also for the entire Middle East. Democratic reformers in neighboring Syria, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait will all be heartened by the ability of Iraqis to hold national elections. The “ripple effect” of Iraq’s national elections will be felt in other authoritarian countries of the region as well, such as Egypt, Libya and Algeria. Nevertheless, it is one thing to hold national elections. It is quite another to forge a sustainable democracy.

The Election Environment

The most notable fact about the National Assembly elections is that they were held at all. Virtually all of the political actors outside Iraq, and many inside the country, opposed the elections. Despite its rhetoric about being committed to establishing democracy in Iraq, the United States never completely supported free and open elections after toppling Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in April 2003. Under the plan put forth by L. Paul Bremer, the administrator of the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), national elections were to be preceded by a series of caucuses that would have chosen candidates. Designed to ensure that the majority of candidates were not opposed to U.S. interests in Iraq, this idea quickly foundered in the face of strong opposition by the Hawza, the loose coalition of Shii religious organizations led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. It was Sistani’s insistence that national elections not be delayed and that they be based on one person, one vote, that paved the way for the January 2005 polling.

Although neighboring Iran was obviously pleased with the prospect of a Shii electoral victory in Iraq, it too had misgivings about free and open elections. As the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War demonstrated, Iraq’s Shia considered themselves Iraqis first and Shiis afterward.⁴⁰ The war was the first Shii-Shii war fought in the modern era. That nationalism trumped religion in the war certainly gave the leadership of the Islamic Republic pause when contemplating whether Iraq’s Shia were really their allies.

Following the fall of Saddam, the young firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr, son of the highly respected Shii cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, whom the Baathist regime assassinated in 1999, created his so-called Mahdi Army. Seeking to take advantage of what he perceived to be a power vacuum in the Shii community, one of al-Sadr’s first acts was to assert that only those clerics born in Iraq should be allowed to exercise political power. This was a clear reference to Sistani, who was born in Iran, and represented not only an effort to usurp Sistani’s power but a rejection of Iranian influence in Iraq’s domestic politics as well.

Iran’s conservative leadership knew that Iraqi elections would only spur further calls for liberalization inside Iran. The prospects of Kurds, secularists, democratically minded Sunni Arabs and other minorities taking office in an Iraqi parliament held little appeal for Iran’s hardline clerics. Iran only supported elections if it could be assured that groups it had supported, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, would come to power as a result.

Iraq’s other neighbors abhorred the idea of free elections as well. Syria’s Baath party was deeply shaken by the deposing of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime. Already beset by struggles within the political elite between hardline supporters of the deceased president

Hafiz al-Asad and younger supporters of his son and current president, Bashar, who favored limited reforms, the Syrian regime also faced calls for greater freedoms from a rapidly growing Islamist movement as well as a smaller liberal democratic reform movement. The Syrian regime viewed free elections in Iraq, which would only add to pressures for reforms at home, as very troublesome. By allowing large numbers of Iraq's ex-Baathist leadership to take refuge in Syria, the regime also opened itself to greater pressure from the United States to curb financial support for the insurgency from within Syria.

Saudi Arabia had other reasons to oppose elections in Iraq. Throughout the 1990s, the Saudi monarchy resisted U.S. and international efforts to aid the Shia of southern Iraq, who suffered most from the UN sanctions regime imposed on Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. Fearful that Saudi Arabia's own restive Shii population, concentrated in the oil-rich northeastern area of the country, would demand greater rights and perhaps even a measure of local autonomy, the Saudi monarchy did not want to see a democratic model, which its own Shia could emulate, develop in neighboring Iraq.

The Hashemite monarchy in Jordan also opposed free elections in Iraq. Facing pressures to democratize from Islamist forces, many of which renounced violence and called instead for winning power through the ballot box, King Abdallah feared that truly free elections would give Islamists and a smaller number of Western-oriented reformers a landslide victory in the Jordanian parliament. Yet the Jordanian monarchy had other fears more regional than domestic in nature: an extension of Iranian influence to their common border with Iraq. Just before the elections, in an obvious attempt to encourage a high voter turnout among Iraq's Sunni Arab population, King Abdallah warned of a "Shii crescent" extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria and into southern Lebanon. The balance of power in regional politics, he warned, would be tilted in a dangerous direction.

But above all, Iraqis committed to democratic elections had to worry about the violent insurgency that has led to the loss of thousands of Iraqi lives. In a strange reconciliation among former enemies, ex-Baathists joined forces with Islamic radicals, some of whom were foreigners drawn to Iraq to fight the United States.⁴¹ Radical Islamist groups such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Army of the Adherents of the Sunna, as well as a number of smaller groups, claimed that democracy was "anti-Islamic" and a plot by Western imperialism to undermine Iraq's Muslim character and cultural traditions. In their words, polling stations were "centers of atheism."⁴² A number of blunders by the CPA, especially the wholesale dismissal of the Iraqi army during the summer of 2003, helped fuel opposition to the American occupation of Iraq and to many Iraqi politicians that cooperated with it.⁴³

The Need for a New Conceptual Lens

No one predicted that the strongest advocate of democracy in Iraq would be its most prominent religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Sistani. When the CPA, under Paul Bremer's leadership, ignored Iraq's Shia, Sistani forced their interests onto the national political agenda. Although he never met with Bremer directly, Sistani sent messages through emissaries that made it clear he would accept nothing less than immediate elections without preconditions.

When, in August 2004, Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army began a second uprising against U.S. and allied forces, Sistani left Iraq, supposedly to receive treatment for heart problems in London. After it became clear that Sadr could not dislodge American forces from Najaf and other cities in the Shii south, Sistani returned to Iraq via Kuwait. Wending his way north in an automobile caravan towards al-Najaf, Sistani gathered a huge following of supporters along the way who followed him into the shrine city. Once there, Sistani was able to accomplish what the United States had been unable to do: to have Sadr's Mahdi Army surrender its weapons, dispense with violence and enter the political process.

Prior to the recent elections, it was Sistani who issued religious decrees stating that it was incumbent upon all Iraqis to vote in the January National Assembly elections. Although he continued to distance himself from direct involvement in politics, Sistani played a major role in forging the United Iraqi Alliance; which emerged as the dominant political force in the elections, having won the largest number of seats in the new National Assembly.

What these developments suggest is the need to view Iraq through a different conceptual lens. This is especially true of American policy makers, who entered Iraq with little or no understanding and appreciation of the country's political dynamics. That the major force behind Iraq's democratization in the wake of 35 years of Baathist authoritarianism should be the spiritual leader of Iraq's Shii community indicates that there is no necessary contradiction between Islam and democracy. Thus, the elections undermine the stereotype that Islam and democracy are necessarily polar opposites. While American and Western policy makers may feel uncomfortable interacting politically with members of the Hawza and their counterparts in the Sunni Arab religious establishment, clerics will need to be taken seriously as political actors as a result of the recent elections. Obviously, the U.S. efforts to marginalize religious elements was a failed policy.

The United States and many other Western and even regional states have traditionally viewed Iraq through an ethnic lens that assumes rigid and static political identities. However, meetings held between Shii and Sunni Arab religious parties and organizations after the January elections suggest that there may be considerable cooperation in the future by religious forces that transcends ethnic lines.⁴⁴ In other words, the most important political cleavage in the wake of the National Assembly lessons may become that of secularists versus those political forces that seek to impose a more Islamist understanding of politics and society on Iraq. In this process, a cross-ethnic alliance of Shii and Sunni Arabs (and perhaps even some Kurdish Islamist organizations) could gain in strength.

The Role of the Kurds

One of the most important results of the Iraqi elections is the powerful showing of the Kurdistan Coalition List which constitutes an alliance between the two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party, headed by Massud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, headed by Jalal Talabani. The Kurds, who historically have been badly treated by the central government in Baghdad, have demanded that the new Iraqi constitution, that will be written under the auspices of the new National Assembly, structure Iraq along federalist lines. Having gained second place in the January voting, the Kurds stand ready to play an important role as power brokers in the composition of the

new National Assembly. If the Kurds throw their political support to the United Iraqi Alliance, it will allow Islamist groups to push their religious agenda within the new parliament. If, on the other hand, the Kurds decide to support secular forces, such as the Iraqi List of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, and secular forces within the United Iraqi Alliance and among Iraq's Sunni Arabs, the National Assembly's agenda may take on a very different political hue.

The Political-economy Dimension

Since the fall of Saddam and the Baath party, public-opinion polls have demonstrated a continued strong commitment to establishing democracy in Iraq. However, Iraqis give greater importance to personal security and a decent standard of living. The national unemployment rate is estimated at 65 percent, which is probably even higher among men and women under the age of 25. Clearly, Iraq's political difficulties have been exacerbated by the poor state of its economy. Unfortunately, much of the funding that the United States has supplied to Iraq has gone to large infrastructural projects, while only a relatively small amount has been used to provide employment for Iraqis. The post-war inflation has only increased the economic problems for those who are without work. There is little doubt that many of the recruits to insurgent organizations are motivated by nationalist concerns. However, it is also clear that most of these recruits lack gainful employment. After the fall of the Baathist regime, many Iraqis were led to believe that the economy would experience a dramatic improvement due to an influx of U.S. economic assistance. Not only is the Iraqi economy very weak, but the discrepancy between the expectations of the populace and actual economic performance further embittered many Iraqis, especially young people who have little hope for the future.

One way to strengthen Iraqi democracy will require foreign donors such as the United States, the EU and prosperous Arab states to contribute funds that will provide employment for Iraqis until the economy can regain its strength, particularly after the oil industry has been able to reconstitute itself, a prospect that is still several years in the future. The political economy of Iraqi democracy will remain an important issue for the foreseeable future. Democracy cannot sustain itself in Iraq in the face of economic stagnation.

Strategies for Democratic Activists

Iraqis will not be inclined to support democratically elected governments if they cannot improve the economic life of the country as a whole. But improving the economy is closely linked to repressing the insurgency that continues to plague Iraq. If insurgent attacks are to end, a military strategy alone will not be successful. One strategy that the new Iraqi government can promote is "micropolitics," an effort to encourage contending political parties and organizations to negotiate their differences. Such a strategy would establish an ongoing dialogue among Iraq's major political groups not only to pave the way for solving the differences among contending political forces, but also to promote trust among Iraq's key political actors.

Another strategy is to use historical memory to promote reconciliation among Iraq's myriad political organizations.⁴⁵ The positive accomplishments of the Iraqi nationalist

movement prior to February 1963, when the first Baathist regime seized power, included creating cross-ethnic alliances, establishing a nascent civil society, fostering associational life, including a large number of professional, labor, women's and artistic organizations, creating a vibrant press, and promoting literary and artistic innovations that enhanced political and cultural tolerance.⁴⁶ Although the mainstream of the Iraqi nationalist movement was dealt a serious blow in 1963 and afterward, the positive legacy of the broader Iraqi nationalist movement is still very much alive. The new Iraqi government might employ older nationalists, including artists, intellectuals and university faculty, to bring this positive historical memory to the attention of Iraqi youth. Through television and radio programs, folklore that emphasizes the shared traditions of all Iraq's ethnic groups, films and artistic exhibitions, articles in the press – which now numbers over 200 newspapers – and secondary school textbooks, this positive history, which began before World War I, can demonstrate to Iraqis that democracy is not an alien form of government but one grounded in their own nationalist traditions.

Building “Thick” Democracy

The process of building democracy in Iraq will not be easy. Unlike the neoconservative vision of democracy advocated by the Bush administration, which envisioned an Iraqi government with limited involvement in the country's social and economic affairs – what some have referred to as the “night watchman state” – the new Iraqi government will have to eschew a “thin” version of democracy. “Thick” democracy implies active involvement by the government in the country's social and economic affairs so as to promote national reconciliation. This has been necessary in other countries that have experienced severe social trauma, such as South Africa, the Balkan countries and Rwanda. Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime promoted sectarianism and intentionally undermined trust among Iraq's constituent ethnic groups. The challenge of the new Iraqi government will not only be to establish a viable coalition in the National Assembly but to reconstitute a sense of trust and hope in the future that will allow Iraqis to leave the negative legacy of Baathist rule behind.

¹ Donald Rumsfeld, “Global War on Terrorism,” 2003.

² Les Roberts et. al., “Mortality before and after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, October 29, 2004. Also see Lila Gutman, “Lost Count,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 4, 2005, for a discussion of how this rigorous demographic study was buried in the period preceding the 2004 presidential election. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/122/22a01001.htm>.

³ Michael R. Gordon, “The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2004.

⁴ Daniel Byman, Kenneth M. Pollack and Gideon Rose, “The Rollback Fantasy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1999. “Even if rollback were desirable, any policy to achieve it would have to pass three tests to be considered seriously. It would have to be militarily feasible, amenable to American allies whose cooperation would be required for implementation, and acceptable to the American public. All current rollback plans involving the Iraqi opposition come up short. Those who tout these nostrums as superior to existing U.S. policy are therefore either engaging in wishful thinking or cynically playing politics. Either way, for the United States to try moving from containment to rollback in Iraq would be a terrible mistake that could easily lead to thousands of unnecessary deaths.”

⁵ Kenneth M. Pollock, *Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁶ Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Kenneth Pollack," *The New York Times Magazine*, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/24/magazine/24QUESTIONS.html?oref=login&pagewanted=p...>

⁷ It is not as though many of problems went unanticipated, but skeptics were closed out of the "loop" in my experience. For a splendid and prescient article foreseeing many of the problems that did arise, see James Fallows, "The Fifty-First State?" *The Atlantic*, November 2002. Also see my own skepticism in "The Long Haul in the Middle East," a paper commissioned for publication and for presentation at an Army War College-sponsored meeting at the University of Maine, October 20, 2002. The Army War College declined to publish the critical paper and suggested that I could publish it in an "academic journal," although the paper did circulate among army officers as samizdat.

⁸ Kenneth Adelman, "Cakewalk in Iran," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2002.

⁹ Kenneth Adelman, "Saddam's State of Terror," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2002.

¹⁰ Fouad Ajami, "Letter to the Editor," *Foreign Policy*, 2004.

¹¹ William Kristol, "The End of the Beginning," *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 8, No. 34, 2003.

¹² Reuel Marc Gerecht, "A Necessary War: Unless Saddam Hussein Is Removed, the War on Terror Will Fail," *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 8, No. 6, 2002.

¹³ Reuel Marc Gerecht, "Why We Need a Democratic Iraq," *The Weekly Standard*, March 24, 2003.

¹⁴ Larry Diamond, "Iraq's Democratic Revolution," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2004.

¹⁵ Bill Keller, "The Sunshine Warrior," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 22, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/22/magazine/22WOLFOWITZ.html?pagewanted=print&p...>

¹⁶ Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Has or will the issue of sectarianism become a revived topic for debate in the Arab world? It is hard to imagine that the ascendancy of Iraq's Shia will not affect identity politics in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Bahraini informants emphasize that vibrations from Iraq are being deeply felt. In turn, will we see governments becoming more accommodating to Shii constituents as we seem to be witnessing in Bahrain?

¹⁸ In general, U.S. officials have tended to "misunderestimate," to coin a term, the social resilience of the insurgency in Iraq. In Lebanon, the Israeli army faced a resistance force with a full-time cadre of less than 500. Other fighters were weekend *mujahideen* – mechanics, optometrists, bakers – who disappeared for a few days on operation and then returned to work. That force prompted a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. In Iraq, as in Lebanon, a village force of five or ten draws strength from cousins, friends and co-religionists and grows accordion-like – 5,000 becomes 25,000. In late October, U.S. officials estimated that there were 10,000 to 12,000 insurgents, or more than double the number estimated in late 2003.

¹⁹ Peter W. Galbraith, "Iraq: The Bungled Transition," *The New York Review of Books*, 2004.

²⁰ Robert Kagan, "Lowering Our Sights," *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2004.

²¹ <http://www.diplomatsforchange.com/contact/contact.shtml>.

²² This brief draws on research I conducted this year in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait on the causes and dynamics of Islamist auto-reform. Supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the United States Institute of Peace, this research included 46 interviews with political activists, journalists and researchers, many of whom were affiliated with the non-violent mainstream of the Islamic Trend.

²³ Hamdy Al Hussein, "Muslim Brotherhood Submits Own Initiative for Reform," *Islam On-Line*, March 4, 2004. Akef made this remark at a Brotherhood press conference in Cairo on March 4, 2004, in which he outlined the Brotherhood's own reform agenda.

²⁴ See Marina Ottoway, "Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility," Middle East Series, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, No. 35, March 2003.

²⁵ Interview with the author, June 29, 2004, Amman.

²⁶ "Kuwaiti Deputy Criticizes U.S. Embassy 'Interference' in Domestic Affairs," *Quds Press News Agency*, London, June 5, 2004.

²⁷ Interview with the author, March 8, 2004, Cairo. Mubarak al-Duwailah, a leader in the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait, made a similar argument.

²⁸ Comments from a group interview with Muhammad Mahdi Akef, Abd al-Munem Abu-l-Futuh and Esam al-Aryan at the Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters, March 16, Cairo.

²⁹ Abdo Baaklini, Guilain Denoeux and Robert Springborg, *Legislative Politics in the Arab World: The*

Resurgence of Democratic Institutions (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

³⁰ Sheilo Carapico, "Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Summer 2002, pp. 379-95.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 395.

³² *The New York Times*, September 1, 2004.

³³ Michael C. Hudson, "Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1988, pp. 157-72.

³⁴ Michael C. Hudson, "Obstacles to Democratization in the Middle East," *Contention*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Winter 1995, pp. 81-106.

³⁵ Augustus Richard Norton, ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994, 1996).

³⁶ Ghassan Salamé, ed., *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994).

³⁷ Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Middle East: Theoretical Perspectives*, Vol. 1 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

³⁸ For a discussion of the June 1954 elections, see Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (University of California Press, 2005), pp. 100-10. Unfortunately, the June elections, which led to democratic forces winning seats in Baghdad's and Mosul's most important electoral districts, were annulled the following month by the perennial prime minister and strongman Nuri al-Said.

³⁹ A statement published on January 26, 2005, by the al-Qaeda Organization in Iraq, headed by Abu al-Musab al-Zarqawi, reads as follows: "Your brothers in the military wing of the al-Qaeda organization in Iraq announce they are ready to wash the streets of Baghdad with the blood of the voters," http://www.islam-minbar.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=940&forum=3.

⁴⁰ On Shii attitudes towards the war, see Eric Davis, "The War's Economic, Political Damage to Iraq," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1980.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the insurgency, see the interview with the former high-ranking Baathist, Salah al-Mukhtar, where he discusses this alliance. See the interview (in Arabic) in the Kurdish newspaper, *Hawlati*, December 22, 2004.

⁴² In a taped speech on January 23, 2005, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi raised seven arguments for why democracy equals heresy. According to him, Muslim warriors must wage *jihad* against the soldiers of the idol of democracy, whether these [soldiers] be crusaders or their democratic agents who are apostates according to Islam (*Murtaddun*) The enemies of Allah, the crusaders, and the apostate groups, have closed ranks and agreed to establish an infidel democratic government in Iraq, despite differences in their schools of thought and political viewpoints. In contrast, the Jihadist warriors have no united leadership, and no general imam to whom they have sworn allegiance, <http://www.alm2sda.net/vb/showthread.php?t=6822>.

⁴³ For a discussion of CPA policy in Iraq, see Eric Davis, "Democracy's Prospects in Iraq," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note*, June 30, 2004.

⁴⁴ "al-Hakim Yaqud Ijtimaat al-Tafahum ma al-Qiyadat al-Suniya" ([Abd al-Aziz] al-Hakim Holds Consultative Meetings with the Sunni Leadership), *al-Zaman*, February 8, 2004.

⁴⁵ See, "History Matters: Past as Prologue in Building Democracy in Iraq," *Orbis*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 1-16.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the Iraqi nationalist movement, see Davis, *Memories of State*, esp. Chapters 2-5.