

## COMMENTARY

**Keeping the Iraqi Elections in Perspective**

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Iraqis have good reasons to celebrate the conduct of their local and provincial elections. They have taken place with a minimum of violence and with relatively high levels of participation. Iraqi forces provided most of the security for the first time, and a wide range of candidates ran on the basis of representing their constituents, rather than as part of lists that polarized the country into choosing Shi'ite Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurd. These also were clearly Iraqi elections; no one can credibly accuse them of having been stage managed or manipulated by the United States.

At the same time, there are very good reasons for caution. It is the outcome of an election that counts. No one yet knows the results in terms of how many of those elected represent divisive sectarian and ethnic candidates, or individuals who will seek power or advantage for themselves.

It is not clear how the election has gone in deeply divided Shi'ite Arab and Sunni Arab areas like Diyala, or in an even more divided Ninewa, which is a test of just how deeply Arab, Kurd, Turcoman, and other minorities will be able to peacefully work together on the basis of any kind of vote. Moreover, the vote did not include 4 of Iraq's 18 provinces (Dohik, Erbil, Suleimaniya, and Kirkuk)—one of which includes Kirkuk city and Iraq's northern oil fields. Violence may break out between Arab and Kurd over the impact of the election in the provinces that did vote, but the key test is still to come.

Even when the election results are known, it will be months before anyone can determine what they mean in terms of practical impact on Iraq's political and economic life. Far too many analysts focus on how officials are chosen, rather than their capability to govern. In practice, real world political legitimacy is roughly 90 percent quality of governance and 10 percent democracy. Some 14,500 candidates ran for only 440 provincial council seats in this election. Even those with political experience and/or experience in office often had minimal real world capability to govern and little experience in actually working with other factions and parties.

It is not yet clear how well the vast majority of those candidates who are elected in this election will actually do in office. For many, it will be a learning experience—to put it mildly. It will also be an sobering—in not grim—experience in dealing with a central government that has deep divisions of its own, has deep elements of factionalism and corruption, often acts to the narrow advantage of its leaders, and which has not demonstrated the capability to allocate its budget effectively, much less actually spend it. These problems will be compounded by the fact that when Iraq is moving from a surplus of oil export income to major problems with its coming national budget and economy.

It also is clear that the larger national parties have seen this election as a prelude to a series of lengthy power struggles that will occur as Iraq moves toward a national election later in 2009 or early in 2010. They will make every effort to manipulate the results of this election to serve their own ends, and they scarcely are united in serving the broad national interest of Iraq:

- ***The Kurdish parties are increasingly divided from the rest of Iraq, and Arab-Kurdish tension now presents the greatest risk of serious violence.*** The Kurdistan Alliance—dominated by Masoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talibani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—are becoming steadily more separated from the Arab parties in the government. There was no voting in three Kurdish-dominated provinces and the key province that is the location of Kirkuk and Iraq’s northern oil fields.
  - It is clear, however, that the Kurdish factions are making a systematic effort to increase their political power at the local level, to dominate contested areas, and use the Pesh Merga and Kurdish-dominated elements in the army and police force to secure their influence and position in mixed areas. At some point, this will lead to active power struggles in contested areas, although there is no way to predict whether these power struggles will be violent.
  - At least some significant local power shifts could emerge from this election. The fact that so few Sunnis voted previously in Ninewa did, however, give them nearly 75 percent of the seats on the council. It seems likely that Sunnis will not be a majority. At least some Kurdish-dominated areas may likely come under Arab rule, and this may also happen in parts of Diyala and Salah al Din.
- ***The previous dominant Shi’ite coalition—the United Iraqi Alliance—has fractured in ways that can have a very mixed impact on Iraq’s future:***
  - ***Maliki’s Islamic Call (Dawa Party) and the State of Law coalition have become increasingly nationalist, secular, tribal, and distanced from Iran.*** Maliki has gone from a compromise minority leader to a candidate for strongman. He does not have control over a militia but does have considerable influence over armed Shi’ite Tribal Support Councils. He has direct control of two units in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)—included the elite counterterrorism force—as well as considerable influence in other elements of the ISF. He advocates national unity and has not supported any form of Shi’ite federalism. Maliki also has increasingly favored the Arab cause over the Kurds, creating a split with the Kurds that once backed him.
  - ***The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) controls the Finance Ministry, and has controlled a number of governorates, and the security of key cities like Najaf and Karbala.*** Its Badr Organization has an important influence in some elements of the ISF and can operate to a limited degree as a separate militia. It is not clear, however, how well it will do in the elections. It is sometimes seen as too religious, as having failed to govern effectively where it had power, and tied too closely to Iran. Its leader—Abdel Aziz al-Hakim—is ill with cancer and neither he, nor his son and heir Ammar al Hakim—have ever been particularly charismatic. ISCI does, however, have a broad base of competent leaders—like Iraq’s vice president Adel Abdul Mahdi—where the Maliki faction of Dawa does not. ISCI leaders spent

many years in exile in Iran, Hakim once recognized the status of Iran's Supreme Leader, and ISCI is seen as much more under Iranian influence than Dawa and Fadhila. Hakim and some elements of ISCI have favored the creation of a nine-province Shi'ite federal area in the south—sometimes called “Shiastan”—that would give the Shi'ites control over much of the country's oil reserves and infrastructure.

- ***The Sadrists did not run openly under the sponsorship of Sadr, but did run as the Sadr al-Iraq, Blameless and Reconstruction, and Mission (Risalyun) lists.*** The Sadrists still have a major influence in the south and Sadr City. They are, however, now deeply fractured. Fortunately, this includes the Mahdi Army. A series of reversals and cease-fires have left it deeply divided, and key elements have limited loyalty to Sadr, although this could make them turn violent as well as take them largely out of the normal political process. Sadr's efforts to turn much of his militia into a disciplined civil-action force called the *Mumahidoon* have had mixed success at best. The same is true of the remaining force that he said would be directed solely against the United States and other occupiers. There still, however, are dangerous elements of the special groups, some of which may still have Iranian support. Some Iraqis also believe that Sadr's nationalism has been seriously compromised by his increasing dependence on Iran.
- ***The Fadhila Party has seen its control weaken over Basra and its port traffic, but it still controls the governorship and had a slight majority in the provincial council.*** It also has influence in other areas in the southeast, including those that export some 65 to 70 percent of Iraq's oil. Fadhila has advocated a smaller Shi'ite federal area in the three provinces where it has the most influence: Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar—which would give the party that controlled such an area power over much of Iraq's oil wealth as well as its port. Fadhila has small, but largely unproven militia and no clear influence in the ISF.
- ***A number of new Shi'ite parties emerged, like the Constitutional Party. There are also many untested local and tribal Shi'ite candidates and national and semi-secular parties with Shi'ite leaders.*** One key issue will be how much power and/or votes they gain in this election.
- ***The Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the senior Shi'ite clergy (Hawza) are still a major political force,*** and one courted by every major Shi'ite faction, but have less control and influence than in the past.
- ***Sunni political factions are also deeply fractured.***
  - ***The Iraqi Islamic Party*** is a major element of the national representation of Sunnis in the Council. It has origins in Iraq's Moslem Brotherhood and has ties to Ba'athist elements. It also, however, has seen its power shift steadily to tribal elements and leaders from the Sons of Iraq, especially in the areas of Anbar, Nnewa, and Diyala where it won votes in the national election because it led the Sunni coalition—the Iraqi Consensus Front—and was the only real choice. Its leader, Tareiq al Hashemi is one of Iraq's two vice presidents but has shown little ability to mobilize Sunni support.

- ***Other “national” Sunni parties in the Iraqi Consensus Front seem to have lost even more influence.*** These include the National Dialogue Council (Khalaf Ualyyan) and General Peoples Congress (Adnan al-Dulaimi).
- ***The National Iraq Dialogue Front (an antigovernment and anticonstitution party led by a former Ba’athist, Saleh al-Mutlak) has uncertain levels of power.*** The Front won only 11 seats in the Council in December 2005 and has been largely excluded from government since that time. It is unclear what level of popular Sunni support it, or parties like it, still command.
- ***Diyala Province is deeply divided between Arab Shi’ite and Arab Sunni, with Kurdish and other minority elements.*** It has an uneasy peace, but many areas are segregated by sect, and Sunni tribal political and armed elements compete with Shi’ite elements as well as each other. There are still some active Neo-Ba’athist Sunni political elements.
- ***A wide range of tribal factions and elements of the Sons of Iraq and other Popular Councils are vying for power, running against each other as well as the national Sunni political parties.*** They could fracture much of the Sunni power structure into individual local elements of service politics.
- ***Significant elements of al Qaeda in Iraq still exist and pose a threat in the areas outside Baghdad, Diyala, and especially in the north in Ninewa.*** They are largely defeated but can scarcely be counted out and could suddenly reemerge as a major power in any new Sunni-Shi’ite or Arab-Kurd fighting.
- ***Some Shi’ites argue that there are significant Sunni-led elements in the Army and ISF.***
- ***A wide variety of local nationalist, secular, and special interest parties and candidates may further complicate the political mix.*** These include elements of former prime minister Allawi’s Iraqi List, the National Democratic Alliance, and a number of smaller and minority parties. More arguably, some say they now include Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress.

None of these political divisions are new, and it must be stressed that they so far have played out largely at the political level and with a minimum of violence. The fragmentation of the Shi’ite and Sunni blocs may also lead to more realistic politics based on local needs and representation as well as tension. Accordingly, neither the election nor Iraq’s political divisions provide a clear reason to be pessimistic about Iraq or to assume worst cases. There also, however, is no reason to be optimistic about the impact of the elections simply because Iraqis voted. Iraq is very much a work in progress, and one that will take at least several more years to achieve any meaningful stability.

It is also important to remember that the days in which outside aid, debt forgiveness, and fixed allocations of Iraq’s oil export income minimized the economic strains in Iraq, are all over. Iraq is still a very attractive target for outside oil investment, but has done far too little to expedite such investment. Local politics still depend almost completely on the central government’s allocation of its share of oil export income, which accounts for more than 90 percent of government revenues.

The global financial crisis has made other forms of investment in Iraq even more problematic, and some estimates put government-related employment at 70 percent of the nonagricultural labor force. Oil prices have dropped from nearly \$140 a barrel to levels averaging around \$40, and Iraq has already had to cut its planned budget for 2009 from \$78.4 billion to \$68 billion and may well have to cut it again. For the first time, the central government has to warn of layoffs and serious budget cuts.

At best, the provincial and local elections are simply a first step in the shift from the war after the war to real post-conflict reconstruction. At worst, they will be the prelude to new rounds of violence or divisive power struggles. Even “Iraq good enough” is still far from any kind of certainty. Much continues to depend on both the evolving political skills of Iraq’s leaders and the support they get over the next half-decade from the United States and the international community.

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