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Iraq's Remarkable Election

The government ensured integrity and security. Iran and sectarianism were the big losers.

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When the surge in Iraq began in January 2007, no one imagined that two years later Iraq would plan and conduct provincial elections with limited Coalition assistance and presence, that those elections would proceed smoothly and peacefully, and that the United Nations special envoy would be able to certify its legitimacy immediately. Nor could anyone have dreamt that the news story would be not the smoothness and peacefulness of the polling, but its results and the prospects they offer for political progress in Iraq.

The security was an impressive demonstration of the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and its legitimacy with Iraqis. Iraqi National Police, local police, and Iraqi Army troops were entirely responsible for the physical security of all polling places on election day. They rehearsed procedures for requesting and receiving quick-reaction forces drawn from Coalition and other Iraqi troops, but did not need to implement these emergency plans.

There had been reason to fear suicide bombers at polling sites, but none struck. But Iraqis were confident enough to bring their children to polling places. This was the first time that U.S. forces were not increased prior to an Iraqi election.

The Iraqi High Electoral Commission played a role in conducting legitimate elections. It standardized procedures for ISF securing the polls. Working in conjunction with the U.N. Assistance Mission Iraq, the commission guided the registration of voters and candidates, and oversaw polling procedures, absentee balloting, and the counting of ballots.

Iraqi voters chose nationalist, secularist parties over religious parties by a wide margin. In the mostly Shiite south, candidates associated with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party appear to have gained significantly. This outcome is noteworthy because Dawa came to power in the 2005 elections with virtually no grass-roots support or organization. Few would have predicted Mr. Maliki's electoral success even a year ago.

Moqtada al-Sadr, by contrast, relied on grass-roots support for his movement and seemed poised to dominate elections in the south a year ago. But he lost much of his popular support when Iraqi Security Forces defeated his militias in Basra, Baghdad and Maysan in June 2008. The door was open for the well-organized Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council (ISCI), the clerically dominated party that had controlled many important provincial governorships and councils in the south. Yet Iraqis voted instead for Mr. Maliki's coalition or for the secular Shiite coalition of former prime minister Iyad Allawi.

Mr. Maliki certainly used his position as prime minister and his control of Iraq's wealth to enhance his political position among the Shiites. But he delivered more than money. He cleared southern Iraq's urban areas of Shiite militias, including those directly and actively supported by Iran, and re-established civil order in wartorn Basra, Diwaniyah, Karbala, Maysan, Wasit and Dhi Qar provinces. He thereby gave a degree of security to these communities

for which he is now being rewarded electorally.

Early results in the Sunni-Arab core provinces of Anbar, Salah-ad-Din and Diyala are equally heartening. Large numbers of Sunni Arabs boycotted the 2005 provincial and parliamentary elections, leading to feelings of political disenfranchisement that helped fuel the insurgency. Furthermore, those Sunni Arabs who did vote in the 2005 parliamentary elections elected a very narrow and extremist slate that claimed to speak for the entire Sunni-Arab community and refused to make compromises with the Shiite government.

The Sunni political spectrum in 2009 encompasses a much wider range of views, which have each achieved a share of the votes. This development offers the possibility of real cross-sectarian coalitions, as Mr. Maliki is no longer dependent on ISCI for influence in the Shiite areas, and can choose among possible Sunni partners in mixed areas.

The most surprising results were from Ninewah province in the north, where a new political entity formed in 2008 called al Habda seems to have won a majority of the council seats. The Sunni boycott of the 2005 provincial elections had left this province largely under the influence of Kurdish council-members. Kurdish leaders took advantage of that fact to try to create conditions on the ground that would support the annexation of large parts of Ninewah, including parts of its capital, Mosul, to the Kurdish Regional Government.

This effort was highly destabilizing. Ninewah is one of the most diverse provinces, and many of its Arabs and ethnic minorities resented what they perceived as Kurdish expansion. Resentment against this expansion, and also against the failure of the provincial government to provide services, perpetuated a low-level insurgency in this area, permitting al Qaeda to retain its last foothold in Iraq.

Al Habda is a provincial coalition that stands against Kurdish domination of the province and for the provision of security and services to the people of Ninewah. Its rise offers an opportunity to deprive al Qaeda of tacit support within Mosul. It will also force Kurdish leaders to re-evaluate their insistence on "maximalist" demands that threatened to unravel Iraq.

The big loser in this election was Iran. Iranian agents spent a lot of money trying to influence the outcome of the elections in the south, and they largely failed. Iran's favored parties did poorly. The Iranians had hoped to persuade Iraqi voters to punish Mr. Maliki for signing the security agreement with the United States. Instead, these elections proved to be a powerful vote of confidence for the prime minister and his policies, including that agreement.

The big winner in this election was the concept of a unitary Iraq. An attempt to hold a referendum on establishing an autonomous Basra failed before the election. ISCI, the only Arab party that had favored the creation of an autonomous Shiite region, lost ground throughout that region, including in its own stronghold of Najaf. Iraqis have sent a clear message that they want to live in a single state with a strong central government connected to strong provincial governments, rather than in some sort of artificially federated state.

Despite these achievements, American forces will continue to play a vital role as honest brokers and impartial arbiters standing behind efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. National elections will not occur until December, which may cause considerable tension in a parliament whose majority rests on the disfavored parties. The parliamentary conflict between the prime minister and the disfavored parties may be dramatic.

Results in Ninewah and the south offer the prospect of political resolutions to thorny problems that had been generating violence. In the short term, however, those who stand to lose by those political resolutions may well increase violence and brinksmanship.

Al Qaeda will respond violently, if desperately, to the new Sunni political order. Iran has trained and armed Shiite extremists who fled from Baghdad, Basra and Maysan, and who will seek to infiltrate and destabilize those areas.

Also, Iraqi and Kurdish security forces narrowly avoided armed conflict in August 2008 in the ethnically-mixed city of Khanaqin. The status of Kirkuk is still unresolved, much more delicate, and has the potential to generate conflict between the central and regional governments in 2009. The seating of the new councils between now and March, and the election of new governors by those councils, will certainly generate friction, if not armed conflict or assassinations. There are still district (local) and parliamentary (national) elections ahead in 2009.

Now that Iraqis have elected provincial governments of their liking, it is essential that those governments succeed. They will have large budgets to execute with new statutory powers. And the expectations of their electorates are very high.

U.S.-run Provincial Reconstruction Teams, civilian-military units working to rebuild government functions, have a growing role to play in Iraq's provinces and depend on the presence and dispersion of U.S. forces to function. U.S. forces and headquarters still help connect the provinces and the central government, aiding the Iraqi government.

Iraq has gone from being an impending disaster to a golden opportunity. Helping Iraqi internal politics develop peacefully and across sectarian lines is a critical part of reintegrating Iraq into the Arab world, making the world's only Shiite-controlled Arab state acceptable to the Sunni regimes that surround it. That reintegration, in turn, offers tantalizing prospects for balancing Iran and stabilizing the heart of the Muslim world. The stakes in Iraq remain very high, but we are finally starting to see the return on our investment.

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