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The Promise In Iraq's Rebirth

By Samir Sumaida'ie
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When the United States went into Iraq in 2003, Americans had a very limited understanding of the country. Political pundits tended to reduce Iraq to neat categories: an oppressed Shiite majority; a Sunni minority linked to Saddam Hussein's regime; and the Kurds, who had no interest in remaining in Iraq. The strife between these supposedly monolithic communities was often portrayed as permanent and violent.

Much has happened since 2003. Iraq has emerged as a complex and sophisticated society with layers of identity and a diversity of loyalties and interests, all of which are in a dynamic state of change as the country makes an untidy yet fundamental transition from absolute dictatorship, through occupation and violence, to the beginning of a functioning parliamentary democracy.

The significance of the recent local elections must be understood within the context of this transition and change. What these elections reveal is far more than the relative strength or popularity of the various political players -- though this is important and should be studied carefully. These elections have shown that, finally, those who refused to accept the new order and were determined to defeat it by rendering the country ungovernable through violence have come to realize that they have lost; that the political process is the only game in town and that it is in their best interest to play by the new rules.

Those who had descended upon Iraq to defeat the United States through terrorism, initially finding favor and support from the "rejectionists," have themselves been rejected by the Iraqi people. Their strategy to ignite a sectarian civil war has failed. And though they still pose a threat to security, those extremist Islamists were comprehensively and strategically defeated in a Muslim country, a development of profound significance.

The elements in Iraq who thought that they could dominate and create a new form of dictatorship with the trappings of democracy have discovered that they must accept the principles of power sharing.

Furthermore, the elections have proved wrong those who had claimed that Iraqis could not comprehend democracy and therefore could not abide by its rules. The world watched as millions of ordinary Iraqis, proudly displaying their purple forefingers, declared their desire to choose their leaders, and the leaders themselves demonstrated their ability to make adjustments and compromises.

This is not to say that Iraq has finally and irrevocably arrived at a perfect form of democracy. Far from it. Iraq is still beset by daunting external and internal challenges. It does, however, mean that after defeating the extremists and terrorists among its people and demonstrating a repulsion for sectarianism and a will to stay united, Iraq is set to consolidate all that it has achieved, with considerable help from the United States and others.

At the most critical junctures of this transition, Iraqis have demonstrated their independence and unity. This has given them more confidence in their future. Those who thought that they could dominate Iraq from outside, directly or by proxy, surely have realized that their influence will always be limited.

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Looking ahead, the exact speed with which American troops are withdrawn must be determined by joint consultations between the political and military leaders of both countries within the parameters of the status-of-forces agreement. But the continued engagement of the United States in Iraq will be vital to ensuring that what has been achieved is not jeopardized, though the emphasis will inevitably shift from military issues to economic and diplomatic matters.

Our nations have mutual interests in Iraq's future. The success of Iraq would be an outstanding success of American foreign policy. If Iraq succeeds, it has the potential to become one of the most important assets and allies of the United States. This is the beginning of a new era in our relationship, one that opens the way to a flourishing economic, cultural, political and diplomatic partnership that augurs well for the future.

The writer is Iraq's ambassador to the United States.

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