

One Election a Democracy Does Not Make

By Ronald Bruce St John | February 7, 2005

The Iraqi people on January 30th participated in their first truly free elections in more than 50 years. Voter turnout on a relatively peaceful day of voting exceeded all expectations. At some polling places, the mood turned joyous with Iraqis celebrating newfound democratic freedoms in spontaneous street parties. The elections were a resounding success and mark an important first step in Iraq's transition to democracy.

Political Culture of Democracy

That said, a single election, no matter how successful, does not a democracy make, in Iraq or anywhere else. A functioning democracy necessitates the development of a supportive political culture, that unique pattern of political action in which every political system is embedded.

Central elements of this political culture include a growing number of contributing citizens, an associated spread of mass participation and a heightened sensitivity to principles of equality. It also entails an increased capacity on the part of the political system to manage public affairs, control controversy and respond to popular demands. Finally, Iraqis must embrace the concept of a loyal opposition and the rule of law, including a separation of powers between the executive branch, legislature, and judiciary with the government subject to the law as interpreted by the courts.

Little of this exists today in Iraq. This is not to say it can't be developed. But it will take time—and sustained international support. You climb a mountain one step at a time. The Iraqi people have taken an important first step. But they must be encouraged and assisted in taking the requisite next steps.

Twice in recent times, the international community has tried to introduce Western-style democracy, with a supporting rule of law, to alien political cultures. In both Afghanistan and Cambodia, political development has been painfully slow.

Lessons from Cambodia

The general elections held in Cambodia in May 1993 offer an especially thought-provoking and instructive

analogy to the January 2005 elections in Iraq. After 13 years of civil war, electoral preparations in Cambodia, like in Iraq, took place in an atmosphere of threat and intimidation, primarily because the Khmer Rouge opposition refused to cooperate. Nevertheless, the actual conduct of elections was a huge success, surprisingly free of violence. Voters flocked to polling stations long before they opened, despite driving monsoon rains. In the end, more than 89% of registered voters, an estimated 97% of Cambodians eligible to vote, cast a ballot. In comparison, it would appear that only a little better than half that number of Iraqis turned out to vote. Exactly what most Cambodians voted for remains a subject of controversy. William Shawcross, a veteran Cambodia watcher, best captured the atmosphere in Cambodia at the time. "Over most of the country, people had voted for peace, for reconciliation, for [King] Sihanouk, and, perhaps above all, for change. It was a lot to hope for."

The UN-sponsored elections in Cambodia were a unique achievement, but they failed to establish a solid foundation for democratic institutions in a still immature body politic. Instead of spawning change in the political culture of Cambodia, the elections led to the reassertion of past political practices. Power brokers continued to practice politics as usual, evidencing the corruption, narrow horizons and intolerance long dominant in Cambodian politics. And the international community sanctioned Cambodia's failure, providing massive amounts of international aid despite bankrupt reform efforts.

One decade and \$5 billion later, Prime Minister Hun Sen, often through violent and undemocratic means, has consolidated his position as the single most powerful politician in Cambodia. In so doing, he has

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displayed a growing intolerance for any form of political opposition or dissent, an attitude which bodes ill for the future of Cambodia's nascent democracy. In the process, power sharing as applied to Cambodian politics has become an oxymoron with power building the operative concept. Enjoying a monopoly on political power and in control of all forms of security, Hun Sen is moving Cambodia away from a maturing democracy and toward a one-party state.

Whither Iraq?

A comparison of Cambodia after 1993 with Iraq today draws attention to the challenges and pitfalls which Iraqis face. But drawing parallels between attempts to promote democracy in the two states is not to say their ending will be the same.

In this regard, the chorus of opposition voices demanding a clear exit strategy from Iraq, if not the immediate withdrawal of American troops, totally misses the point. Whether or not one opposed the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as this writer did in the strongest terms, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein is history. Having achieved that result at considerable cost to the American people, and an even greater cost to the Iraqi people, now is not the time to cut and run.

On the contrary, attention must focus on assisting Iraqis to build a workable democracy. We simply cannot afford a failed state in the heart of the Middle East. The Iraqis in 2005, like the Cambodians in 1993, more than anything else voted for change. In nurturing this change, the United States may be called on to provide some element of security training for a good long

time. At the same time, support for the growth of democratic institutions in a new political culture is clearly a job for the United Nations, in conjunction with a host of nongovernmental organizations.

In turning to the United Nations, the Bush administration must realize it lacks the moral legitimacy, in or out of Iraq, to be successful in a unilateral nation-building effort. In any case, the U.S. track record in this regard is pretty awful. Over the last century, the United States has replaced at least 18 regimes by military force, but democratic rule prevailed in only five of them—Germany, Grenada, Italy, Japan and Panama. In four of those five successes, Panama being the exception, a multilateral approach was used. The jury is still out on the 18th case—Afghanistan.

President Bush has proclaimed a broad strategy of spreading freedom and democracy throughout the world, but in Iraq the devil is in the detail. The expansion of democracy as a system and a process remains an achievable political goal in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. However, as the Cambodian case aptly demonstrates, it will take a long and costly nation-building exercise.

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