

After Iraq's Wartime Elections: They Were a Success for Most Iraqis but May Yet Lead to Failure for the United States

By Frank Smyth | February 4, 2005

Robert Fisk is the award-winning journalist of the London-based *Independent* newspaper, and he has long been a consistent critic of American imperial policies in the Middle East. "But it was the sight of those thousands of Shi'ites, the women mostly in black hejab covering, the men in leather jackets or long robes, the children toddling beside them, that took the breath away," he reported from Baghdad on election day. "If Osama bin Laden had called these elections an apostasy, these people, who represent 60% of Iraq, did not heed his threats."

The failure of the U.S.-backed election in Iraq is not that it was illegitimate for most Iraqis but that the exercise has only deepened Iraq's sectarian divisions and perhaps moved the country closer toward the specter of a full-scale civil war. Progressives should remain critical of the January 30 election but not for the reasons that most have articulated so far. Many anti-war critics were so busy pooh-poohing the balloting as a farce engineered by the Bush administration that they forgot that Washington had only agreed to the election under Iraqi Shi'ite pressure. The first U.S. plan for Iraq was to hold indirect elections through regional caucuses, a process that would have lent itself far more easily to American manipulation. But Iraq's Shi'ite grand ayatollah, Ali Sistani, and other Iraqis said no.

Actually, the election results are not likely to enhance American influence over Iraq. According to the reliable Arab-run polling firm, Zogby International, more than two-thirds of Iraq's Shi'ites want U.S. forces out of Iraq either immediately or once the elected government is in place. That goal may be unrealistic, since any sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces could well plunge Iraq into civil war, but it underscores that the election was a step forward for Iraqi sovereignty, despite the conditions of U.S. military occupation in which it took place. U.S. progressives could help Iraqis reach their goal by ensuring that a transfer of power actually occurs.

Only last month, David Ignatius, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, complained that by going ahead with the election the Bush administration would "help install an Iraqi government whose key leaders were trained in Iran." He went on to say "in terms of strategy," the Bush administration "is a riderless horse." In other words, the administration's original plan to install the Iraqi exile, Ahmad Chalabi, as a proxy to control both the Iraqi people and their oil has failed, and now the administration is finding its own rhetoric catching up with itself in last Sunday's election in the form of an expected Shi'ite victory.

Many if not most progressives, however, have downplayed Iraq's sectarian divisions, since to acknowledge them might lead one to admit that the anti-American insurgents are drawn mainly from the nation's long-privileged Sunni Arab minority constituting less than 20% of the Iraqi population. (The 2001 U.S. State Department Human Rights report on Iraq, released in 2002, reported that Sunni Arabs represented 13-16% of the Iraqi population.) During Saddam Hussein's regime, Sunni Arabs dominated not only the ruling Ba'ath Party but also the Iraqi military's officer corps and elite troops.

Strange Bedfellows

Ironically, anti-war activists who discount the divisions in Iraq find themselves bedfellows with senior



Bush administration officials like Steve Hadley, the new White House national security adviser. In a *Washington Post* op-ed article one day before the Iraqi election, Hadley, too, pooh-poohed the notion that Iraq's sectarian splits really matter. Unlike Hadley, U.S. progressives feel that the nonparticipation of Sunni voters casts a pall on the election. But what most progressives are still reluctant to concede is that for most Shi'ites and for nearly all Kurds, who together amount to at least 80% of the population, the election did matter.

Of course, Iraq's sectarian tensions should not be overblown, and they have far more to do with political power than with either religion or ethnicity. In Baghdad, Sunnis and Shi'ites have often intermarried and lived side by side in peace. But it is undeniable that for decades both Shi'ites and Kurds, albeit in different regions, collectively fought against and were persecuted by Saddam's Ba'athist government. As the respected Middle East expert Juan Cole, a major critic of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, wrote in his most recent book:

“Probably a majority of Shi'ites joined the ranks of the opposition in the fateful spring of 1991 when, in the wake of the defeat inflicted on the regime by the U.S. and its allies, Shi'ites in Najaf, Karbala, Basra and elsewhere rose up against the Ba'ath. The regime's retaliation was brutal and effective, leaving countless casualties (rumors of 40,000 dead in Karbala alone have reached me from Iraqi expatriates). More recently, the Iraqi government has waged ecological war on the marsh Shi'ites of the south, draining their swamps and forcing tens of thousands of them to flee to Iran.”

Many American progressives have never acknowledged the tragedy of the failed spring uprisings in 1991, what countless Iraqis at the time called their anti-Saddam *intifada*. During and after the 1991 Gulf War, then-President George H.W. Bush repeatedly urged Iraqis to oust Saddam and “toss him aside.” Within weeks, a full-scale insurgency was under way both south and north of Baghdad. “Saddam Hussein faces his most serious political challenge in more than 20 years in power,” wrote the

CIA in a secret report in the middle of the month-long uprisings. “Time is not on his side.”

Anti-Saddam rebels—dominated by both Shi'ites and Kurds—fought for weeks after the 1991 Gulf War in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces, but Saddam's remaining helicopter gunships, tanks, and elite forces eventually wiped them out. Why did the Bush I administration abandon the rebellion that it helped to inspire? In their joint memoir, George H.W. Bush and his then-national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, wrote: “We were concerned about the long-term balance of power at the head of the Gulf” and the possibility of “[b]reaking up the Iraqi state.”

According to this logic, the January 30 election represents a triumph not for the United States but for Iraq's Shi'ite majority, which is now moving toward the kind of self-empowerment and self-determination that it has long deserved. Progressives familiar with Iraqi history can understand why neither Shi'ites nor Kurds have much love for Sunni Arab Ba'athists, thousands of whom are currently anti-American insurgents. But some anti-war figures, like novelist and activist Arundhati Roy, have not only minimized the roots of today's indigenous Iraqi insurgency but have unabashedly apologized for the indiscriminate use of violence against Iraqi civilians. “[I]f we were to only support pristine movements, then no resistance will be worthy of our purity,” said Roy in a speech in San Francisco last summer.

Anti-war activists like Roy have long championed the poorest of Iraqis, whose children suffered the most in the 1990s under U.S.-backed, UN economic sanctions. But how many of these same anti-war activists have been willing to acknowledge that most of these Iraqis were Shi'as and that they suffered domestically under Saddam?

Other progressives have—perhaps unwittingly—become bedfellows with bigots who stereotype Shi'ite Muslims, unfairly painting Iraq's Shi'ite Arab majority as an alleged tool of Shi'ite Persian clerics who dominate neighboring Iran. This may be a convenient cheap shot at the Bush administration, but it is based on ignorance. Scholars like Moojan Momen, author of the first major English-language text on Shi'ite Islam, Yitzhak Nakash, who wrote the first

study of Iraqi Shi'ites, and Juan Cole have documented that Iraqi Shi'ites have their own particular history, long competing for influence with Iranian clerics. If anything, Iraq's Shi'ites are likely to assert themselves even more if given the chance.

The one Iraqi Shi'ite group that has been lauded by some anti-war columnists is the al-Mahdi militia led by the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. His father—a widely revered cleric—and two brothers were all murdered by Saddam, whose administration tortured and killed hundreds of Shi'ite clerics. The young al-Sadr later ordered his followers to rise up against U.S. troops after the chief U.S. occupying authority in Iraq, Paul Bremer, closed down his movement's newspaper. The irony of progressives' support for al-Sadr is that he is among the most socially reactionary of Iraq's Shi'ite leaders (he has not earned the status of cleric) and has, in his opportunistic search for allies, reached out to the misogynist, anti-democratic mullahs who run Iran. The most respected Iraqi Shi'ite cleric, Ali Sistani, is Iranian-born, but he has consistently sought to keep theology and politics at least somewhat separate in a "quietist" tradition based on ancient Shi'ite scriptures, unlike the modern ruling Shi'ite theocracy in Iran.

Iraq is still a bloody mess, and the choice now for both Iraq's elected government and the United States is whether to pursue a military victory over the insurgents or to reach out to them and to Iraq's Sunni Arab community to negotiate a settlement of the ongoing conflict. U.S. progressives should support attempts at reconciliation in order to minimize further bloodshed.

The El Salvador Parallel

The wartime experience in El Salvador is instructive, although not in the ways that senior Bush administration officials like Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld contend. Both men claim that U.S.-backed elections in El Salvador helped defeat the rebel insurgency. What they forget is that El Salvador's civil war went on for 10 years after the country's first election, and that what ended the war was not an election but the joint decision by the Bush I administration and El Salvador's second

elected government to finally stop trying to eliminate the rebels and instead pursue a negotiated settlement.

Nor is the Central America experience instructive in the way that some anonymous Pentagon officials have recently suggested, when they leaked to *Newsweek* the idea that at least some U.S. military planners in Iraq now want to promote Iraqi death squads based on their experience in the 1980s in El Salvador. (Anyone wishing to thoroughly explore this story should see David Holiday's Central America blog, <http://davidholiday.com/weblog/archive/2004/2005_01_01_archive.html>.) The use of such dirty tactics in Iraq would be one sure way to turn the current level of sectarian violence into a bloodbath with U.S. troops stuck in the middle, perhaps fighting both sides.

What progressives forget when comparing El Salvador and Iraq is that El Salvador's insurgents were nearly all Marxists of one stripe or another. In contrast, Iraq's anti-American insurgents are nearly all right-wingers of one stripe or another—either Sunni Arab nationalists or Islamic Wahaabi fundamentalists—and despise most Iraqi leftists, including the Iraqi Communist Party. U.S. Labor Against the War and the Iraqi Communist Party have recently denounced the murder of a leader of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, Hadi Salih, by what both groups suggested were Ba'athist insurgents. The Iraqi Communist Party participated in the January 30 election, faring better than many Western progressives and Bush administration officials expected. Kurdish candidates also fared well, given their small numbers, and Shi'ite candidates led the pack.

It is time for Westerners of all political persuasions to finally start seeing Iraq's richly diverse people for who they are instead of kicking them like footballs to try to advance a political agenda.

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