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2005

Silm, B. (2005). Iraq' s Historic Elections: Boon or Bane for Iraqis? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 008). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/82196>

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18 February 2005

ON JANUARY 30, Iraqis went to the polls to choose a 275-member National Assembly. The new assembly will then select a prime minister and president by the end of this year. Around 7,500 candidates, from 75 parties and nine coalitions competed to be members of the National Assembly. The Iraqis, who had suffered under Saddam Hussein's regime for more than two decades, found themselves between two hard choices. On the one hand, they faced pressures from militants to boycott the elections or risk more bloodshed. On the other hand, they faced the determination of the United States as the occupying power to proceed with the elections despite repeated calls for a delay from different groups who were worried that the elections would provoke more violence.

The US wanted a massive turnout from the local population in the elections to legitimize its mission of introducing democracy in the country. But at the same time, the militants in Iraq appeared to be enjoying strong support from the people. Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda have officially appointed Abu Musaab Alzarqawi, the leader of the *Qaeda al Jihad fibilladdirafidain* (the Jihad base in the Land of the Two Rivers) to be the al Qaeda leader in Iraq. In a videotape aired last January, Osama had attacked the elections as a non-Islamic practice. "Anyone who takes part in these elections will be an infidel," Osama said in the videotape. He described the elections as an American game that would only serve US interests in the region. He said he had no doubt that the incoming government would be a group of people endorsed by America to defend its policies in the Middle East. Osama called upon the Iraqis to "beware of henchmen who speak in the name of Islamic parties and groups who urge people to participate".

One may wonder whether the elections deserved the intense opposition that was mounted by the militants in Iraq. The elections will certainly not eliminate or remove the ethnic conflicts that Saddam Hussein had kept a tight lid on during his rule. In the absence of a central absolute power, these tensions or conflicts may find their way back after the elections – especially given the radical redistribution of power amongst the various ethnic groups in the country.

Firstly, the Shi'as with 60 to 65 per cent of the population, have claimed their legitimate right to power after winning the majority through the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Long treated as a minority under Saddam despite their dominant numbers, they are now preparing to politically dominate Iraq for the first time in a hundred years. Under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Shi'as have won 48% of the votes. As this is just short of a two-thirds majority, the UIA may have to form an alliance, probably with the Kurds. The Shi'as

nonetheless saw their victory as “a paradigm shift” in the history of this nation. Indeed, they have likened Iraq’s post-elections to the “birth of a new nation in a new region”.

Secondly, the Kurds, comprising 19 per cent of the total population and supported by the US, have come in second with 26% of the votes. They have withstood the tortures and the years of marginalisation under Saddam’s rule. Led by Jalal Talabani, the Kurds are now contemplating taking the presidency in order to ensure their survival, protect their identity and prevent history from repeating itself.

Thirdly, the Sunnis who make up 20 per cent of the population but had dominated politics under Saddam, have now become the political minority. Many of the Sunnis had boycotted the elections and will oppose any changes to the privileged status they enjoyed during Saddam’s time. But with only 12% of the votes, owing to widespread non-participation a change to their status is inevitable. Iyad Allawi, the current prime minister may lose his position as the Shi’as want to appoint one of their own.

When a new prime minister and a new government are appointed, the US and the rest of the world will know whether going through Iraq’s historic elections will lead to peace or to a new round of instability.

With a Shi’a government in Iraq, the big question is how the neighbouring countries will react to this fundamental change in the country’s political map. Relations between the Iraqi Shi’as and Iran - the only Shi’a government in the region - have not always been warm. How will a Shi’a-led government in Iraq be treated by Iran? Will it be seen first as Iraqi, or Iranian? On the other hand, will the Iraqi Shi’a leaders be loyal to Iran or to the Iraqi population?

The elections may have been good for the Iraqis if the exercise is seen as part of a long process to reconcile and bring together the diverse ethnic groups in the country. But any vision that ignores the aspirations of Iraqis themselves will only lead to more bloodshed. The ordinary Iraqis are like any other citizens of the world. They want jobs, education and freedom. At the same time, they refuse to be used for the marketing of concepts like “democracy versus dictatorship” or “believers versus unbelievers”. Instead, they see themselves as the centre of gravity of any grand plan to rebuild their country whose voices must be heard.

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