



The Standoff with Iraqi Shiites over Direct Elections

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

The Bush administration needs to be aware of Islamic history as it works with the Iraqis to forge a democracy in their country. The Shiite Muslims, who constitute a majority of the population, are clamoring for direct elections after centuries of injustice suffered at the hands of others. If the administration rejects that approach to democratization, it runs a serious risk of losing Iraq to violence.

In the modern Middle East, much more than in the West, history is a living force. Denominated by faith, animated by folklore and daily language rich in religious allusion, and remembered overwhelmingly through military victory and defeat, Islamic history is an emotional keyboard for even the least educated and least faithful. When Yasser Arafat and his companions named his organization *Fatah* (“Conquest”), Muslims knew immediately the allusion to the *surah* of the Koran, with its references to victory over the Jews and Arabs uncommitted to God’s calling, and to the early imperial conquests that made Byzantine Palestine Muslim. Shiite Muslims, whose core identity is built upon the injustice done to them by the larger Sunni Muslim world, have this historical sense in spades.

The Bush administration, in the person of L. Paul Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, is now at odds with Iraqi Shiite history and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most influential cleric in Iraq and probably the most renowned divine in Shiite Islam. The ambassador wants to transfer sovereignty from the Provisional Authority and its Iraqi Governing Council to a new Iraqi governing body chosen by caucuses controlled by

the Provisional Authority and the Governing Council. This larger, arguably more representative, but unelected body would then control the political process leading to a constitutional assembly and national legislative elections. Ayatollah Sistani, however, wants direct elections for any provisional government, as well as for a constituent assembly. Beyond any modern education that Sistani may have had in Iran and Iraq—the great libraries of Shiism’s religious schools are well-stocked with books about the Western tradition of one-man, one-vote—he certainly knows his flock’s fate since Britain created Iraq from the ruins of the Ottoman state.

Simply put, Shiites everywhere have been cheated—by the Ottomans, British, Sunni Arab Hashemites, pan-Arab nationalists, Baathists, and the first Bush administration, which let them die by the tens of thousands when Saddam put down the rebellion following the first Gulf War. To make matters worse for the Shiites of Iraq, their country is the birthplace of Shiism, where annually the faithful commemorate (except when the Sunnis would not let them) the mother of all short-changes, the defeat and martyrdom of the Imam Hussein, the son of the Caliph Ali and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims loyal to an Umayyad caliph in Damascus—the folks who would later be called Sunnis—won the day, and

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kept on winning for 1,300 years (minus a few, usually short-lived, Shiite triumphs).

The Ashura celebrations of Hussein's martyrdom that occurred not long after the fall of Saddam Hussein produced a palpable political quickening throughout Iraq's Shiite community. As one cleric later remarked to me, in the spring of 2003 when the Shiites beat their chests in mourning for the betrayal of their imam, they were really saying the centuries of cheating had come to an end. For him, a democratic system in Iraq would ensure that no conspiracy of forces would ever again hurt Shiites. The age of *taqiyya*—the historic Shiite disposition toward dissimulation in self-defense—could finally end, and Shiites could live as normal men, that is, as Sunnis. Though the understanding of democracy among Iraq's Shiites, especially among the clergy, is more sophisticated than that, at heart this is the wellspring of their democratic sentiment and goodwill toward the United States. Sistani's commitment to the Bush administration's effort to midwife democracy in his country rides on this simple conviction. The more complicated America's blueprint for democracy in Iraq—and the caucus system envisaged by Washington is not easily grasped by American officials, let alone Iraqis—the greater the risk Sistani will abandon the project. Keeping it simple greatly helps to check the historical sense that betrayal is near.

The Administration's Perspective

Of course, American officials do not see it this way, and are increasingly perplexed, if not downright angry, that Sistani does not appreciate their good intentions. The caucus process, so the theory goes, will allow the Iraqi people more control over their affairs more quickly, with a transfer of sovereignty in less than 180 days. Preparations for elections would, in the CPA's view, take eighteen months (though some officials, particularly those at the State Department with experience in successfully jerry-rigging quick elections, think several months could be sliced off the CPA's prognostications). In addition, both Americans and many Iraqis hope the transfer of sovereignty to the new body selected by the caucuses will improve counterinsurgency operations in the Sunni Triangle (more Iraqis will be committed to the process as Iraqis become more responsible for protecting their own political system, and their kith and kin). And radical forces, particularly on the Shiite side, will not be able to use the ballot box to derail the fragile political order, which has been increasingly envenomed by Sunni-stomping

Shiite followers of the clerical upstart Moqtada al-Sadr and Shiite-hating Sunni fundamentalists, who are, it appears, growing in number.

Also, as a senior State Department official fearfully confessed, there is no guarantee that the traditional Shiite forces behind Sistani will be able to stop the followers of al-Sadr, or the radicals within the Shiite Dawa party, or the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq once the passions start to flow in a more open election process. Democracy in this view is the handmaiden of militants in a post-totalitarian society. Conversely, "moderate" Shiite forces led by Sistani do not appear to many so moderate anymore since the ayatollah's recent actions suggest that he may be seeking a one-man veto of Iraq's new order. Sistani's conception of the separation of church and state is obviously not the preferred conception of many in the U.S. government or of the non-Shiite members of the Iraqi Governing Council. There is growing concern in certain quarters that Sistani—born, raised, and partly educated in Iran—shows signs of Persian hubris that might lead to an Iraqi version of Iran's Islamic Republic. Because of his "bad genes," and because members of his family are still in Iran, and thus subject to possible blackmail, Sistani could in fact become a Trojan horse for hardcore Iranian clerical influence throughout Iraq.

Of at least equal concern to U.S. officials is the fact that a nonelected transitional government would also be much less susceptible to terrorist violence, and the Bush administration has been seriously concerned since August that violence could somehow derail the transfer of sovereignty, let alone messy, easily disrupted preparations for national elections. Election results could also easily be skewed by terrorist intimidation. More important, U.S. soldiers, who would have to be used extensively to protect the electioneering, would be much more open to insurgent strikes than they are now.

Understandably, the Bush administration does not want the U.S. casualty rate to spike upward close to November 2004—a possible scenario if the Bush administration allows national elections sooner, not later. And the administration *really* wants to find some way to vest the Arab-Sunni population, who were the backbone of Saddam Hussein's power, in the new political process. Rumors, probably based on fact, of moderate Arab-Sunni families' searching for visas to abandon Iraq are already spooking some U.S. officials, who know that a majority of Iraq's Arab-Sunnis are, though happy about Saddam's fall, distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of a Shiite-dominated state. Elections sooner not later could ruin

the American hope that some political construct is possible for the Arab-Sunnis.

Elections later would, at minimum, punt the problem down the road—an appealing prospect at any time for a U.S. official, let alone during an election year when the Democratic candidate obviously intends to pummel the Bush administration over its handling of Iraq. (How any prowar Democrat can plausibly suggest that better prewar planning could have obviated the great schism between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq is not immediately apparent. The French, Germans, and Russians—the tripartite anti-war union that appears to form the core of Senator John Kerry’s “international community”—have not shown in the last several hundred years notable adeptness with Muslim sectarian squabbles.)

And last but not least, U.S. officials do not want to flinch again before Grand Ayatollah Sistani for fear that the United States will completely lose control of the transition process. Bremer and the Bush administration have already blinked once, if not twice, and each time surely encouraged Sistani to push his views more strongly. Though the Bush administration is loath to admit it, the Provisional Authority and the Pentagon poorly handled the case of Moqtada al-Sadr, the firebrand descendant of the most famous and revolutionary Iraqi clerical family. According to U.S. officials, Sadr was behind the death of U.S. soldiers, but the Provisional Authority and the Pentagon declined to move against him directly (they did round up some of his men) because they feared Shiite repercussions. Sadr and Sistani undoubtedly learned from this failure of American will.

The easiest concern of the Bush administration to understand is its desire not to retreat again before Ayatollah Sistani. The United States will likely discover after July 1—assuming the June 30 date for the transfer of sovereignty holds—that its effective power in Iraq will evaporate quickly. Those on the American right who hope to use Iraq for years to come as a partner in projecting American influence throughout the Middle East, and those on the left who fear that American soldiers will be stuck in Iraq for years, are likely to learn this summer and fall that their hopes and fears are unfounded. American power in Iraq is ideological, not imperial. It is inextricably connected to the promise of democracy. If the Bush administration backs down on the June 30 date—effectively ceding the entire democratic process to Ayatollah Sistani—Ambassador Bremer’s position in Baghdad could become ceremonial overnight.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Anyone who has had any contact with the Provisional Authority knows how far removed it is from the real Baghdad, let alone Iraqi society. It is a good bet that Ayatollah Sistani understands the pitfalls of democracy in Iraq as well as Ambassador Bremer. A very good sign that many in the U.S. government (and in the press) are losing their balance and judgment concerning Sistani and the traditional clergy of Najaf is when they allude ominously to Sistani’s Persianness, implying he contains within him the serious potential for theocratic authoritarianism and nasty anti-American behavior. Ironically, this nefarious Iranian DNA critique is the one that radical “pure-Arab Iraqi” clerics, like Moqtada al-Sadr, and others within the Dawa movement, have used against traditional clerics in Najaf and Karbala who have been insufficiently militant. Before them, the Hashemites regularly threw this gravamen at Shiite clerics, of Iranian lineage or not, who attempted to counter the Hashemite quest to centralize Iraq in Arab-Sunni hands. Ditto the Baath and Saddam Hussein.

The point is, you judge a Shiite cleric first and foremost by his writings, his lectures to his students, the younger clerics he has trained, and his mentors. By all of these criteria, Grand Ayatollah Sistani is a “good” mullah. There are two big intellectual currents in modern Shiite clerical thought. One leads to Khomeini and the other leads to clerics like Sistani. There are certainly overlapping areas between the two schools of thought—the place of women in post-Saddam Iraq will likely be a fascinating subject—but on the role of the people as the final arbiter of politics, there is very little reason to doubt Sistani’s commitment to democracy. Clerics like Sistani may use high-volume moral suasion, they may suggest that a certain view is sinful, but they understand that clerics cannot become politicians without compromising their religious mission.

Having Iranian blood and family in the Islamic Republic surely has made Sistani more sensitive to the pitfalls of clerical dictatorship. Sistani is a true *marja’-e taqlid*—“a source of emulation”—the highest stature that any Shiite cleric can have. The Iranian revolution has done a superb job of deconstructing and diminishing the clerical educational system in Iran. The Islamic Republic now produces only national clerics, whose traditional juridical eminence barely extends beyond the confines of Iran’s religious schools. Sistani is the last great transnational Shiite divine. His eminence easily reaches into his

motherland. The relationship between Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the other senior clerics of Najaf with Iran's mullahs is a complicated work in progress. American officials would be wise not to sell Sistani short in his inevitable competition with Iran's hard-core clergy. The Iranians have not yet let loose hell against the Americans in Iraq even though logistically they probably could. One reason for this is surely Sistani, of whom Iran's ruling clerics must be careful and respectful. As in the matter of democracy in Iraq, Sistani may again become one of America's most effective allies.

Regardless of what the Bush administration decides to do with the June 30 deadline, Bremer and the Provisional Authority are probably going to pass into desuetude quite soon. Once Sistani began Iraq's internal democratic discussion—a debate the Governing Council and the Provisional Authority had failed to generate on their own for months—Bremer's stature was destined to collapse. The Bush administration made Sistani strong the moment it decided to become a bit too clever about constructing an Iraqi political system to limit democracy in favor of communal stability and American self-interest.

So should the administration change course now, and either accelerate national elections for a provisional government before June 30, or abandon the deadline and the transitional caucus system for a directly elected body as soon as possible? The administration is obviously hoping that Sistani is sufficiently spooked by the possibility of a big confrontation with the United States that he will use the United Nations' intercession as a face-saving escape valve. A UN declaration about the logistical problems of having an election before June 30 would, so the theory goes, assuage the Shiites demonstrating on the streets and reinforce the confidence of Najaf's mullahs, who might doubt the democratic commitment of the United States. A man of moderation, Sistani might not want to aid the radicals who are itching for a fight. Unfortunately, this is not a great theory.

Sistani, like most Iraqis, does not really care what the United Nations thinks. The UN's reputation is distinctly bad in the country, especially among the Shiites, who saw it as an antiwar, pro-Saddam institution. Sistani might use the UN as leverage against the United States; he might use it as cover for a retreat. He could also simply discard its views without any hesitation. And the caucus system devised by the Americans and given to the Iraqi Governing Council to support is spiritually, if not operationally, a mess. Neither Ambassador Bremer, nor Colin Powell, nor Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has stood up and

given a full-throated defense of this arrangement. They cannot. It really does not make much sense.

Whatever our legitimate concerns about moving directly to national elections, postponing the franchise is much more likely to increase resentment among those who believe in democracy in Iraq, and to raise unrealistic expectations among those who want to stall and diminish the chances of real representative government (which may, unfortunately, mean a significant slice of the Arab-Sunni population). Those Iraqis who participate in any new unelected transitional government could easily find themselves destroyed politically when they start making controversial decisions unbacked by the legitimacy and authority of elections. The passive voice is a disease in Middle Eastern politics. Unintentionally, the Bush administration could fuel irresponsibility among Iraq's people, who will gladly blame others for their problems. The Bush administration could end up fatally hurting the very Iraqis—the more liberal, Western-minded—who will be inclined to swallow their democratic reservations about the arrangement to work for the common good.

The Bush administration did not need to get itself into this situation. If it had put less emphasis on the expeditious transfer of sovereignty and more on accelerating the election process, the confrontation with Sistani could have been avoided. The grand ayatollah could not have attacked us for being too democratic. Under our watchful and still powerful eye, we could have encouraged Iraqis to develop political parties with a national reach. And it is unlikely that the transfer of sovereignty alone is going to diminish the American death toll in Iraq. It is unwise, especially in an election year, to punt these things down the road. We should assume that the Sunni-inspired violence in Iraq is going to get worse, and devise a strategy, buttressed by an ongoing, fast-paced democratic process, for handling it.

Unless the administration is lucky—and Grand Ayatollah Sistani will let the president know very quickly whether he is—it should be prepared to beat a tactical retreat on the issue of direct elections for a provisional government. It can choose: either direct elections within the June 30 deadline or direct elections as soon as possible after. But if Sistani decides to confront us on national elections and the White House chooses neither of the above, the odds are decent that we will lose Iraq to violence. The Bush administration will have played against Islamic history, not knowing the age of Shiite submission ended when American soldiers liberated the Iraqi people.