



Birth of a Democracy

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

The Iraqi election demonstrated for the first time in Arab history that national sovereignty can be achieved without tyranny. The pictures of courageous Iraqi voters and of the images to follow of the incipient democratic government of Iraq can inspire popular desire to open up regimes throughout the Arab world.

All right. Let us make an analytical bet of high probability and enormous returns: the January 30 elections in Iraq will easily be the most consequential event in modern Arab history since Israel's six-day defeat of Gamal Abdel Nasser's alliance in 1967. Israel's pulverizing defeat of the Arab armies dethroned Nasserism, the romantic pan-Arab dictatorial nationalism that had infected much of the Arab world, particularly its intelligentsia, during the 1950s and 1960s. With the collapse of Nasserism, the overtly secular socialist-cum-fascist age in the Middle East closed—except in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Its spirit would soon die there, too, a victim of Saddam's long and disastrous war against Iran (1980–88), which encouraged the Butcher of Baghdad to emblazon “God is Great” upon the Iraqi flag. Responding to the spiritual agony and internal rot of the pan-Arab dream, Islamic activism gained speed throughout the Middle East and has remained—outside of Iraq and now possibly Palestine—the only serious opposition to the vagaries, incompetence, and corruption of princely and dictatorial rule.

The January 30 elections will do for the people of Iraq, and after them, in all likelihood, the rest of the Arab world, what the end of the European imperial period did not: show the way to sovereignty without tyranny. For the first time really in Arab history, people power has expressed itself

democratically. Say whatever you want about the coverage of the Arabic-language satellite channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabia, they relayed quite well stunning democratic imagery—the repeated shots of entire families voting together, from pregnant mothers with babies to grandparents in wheelchairs. The rulers of the Middle East will no doubt try to depict Iraq's democratic experiment as a vehicle of anti-Sunni Shiite extremism, but the U.S. government—parts of which (the State Department and the CIA) have a tendency to project the rulers' views onto their people—would be well advised to turn a deaf ear. Anyone who watched the satellite coverage knew those families were putting themselves into harm's way, as were even more the Sunni Arabs, who voted in greater numbers than many expected. Arab satellite television, which is Sunni-dominated except for the Lebanese Hezbollah's Al Manar service, has been playing a game—and Al Jazeera is more dedicated to this game than Al Arabia—of pretending that the insurgents in Iraq were the real Iraqis and that all Iraqis really in their hearts supported the insurgents. The savagery of the suicide bombers has undoubtedly complicated this good guy–bad guy scenario, but the easiest way out of this ethical pit has been to suggest that only the over-the-top holy warriors, like Abu Musab al Zarqawi, kill barbarically. Most insurgents, the good patriotic ones defending the fatherland and the fatherland's true faith, just kill American occupiers and their Iraqi lackeys—this has been, at least up to January 30, the reflexive Al Jazeera spin.

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Arab satellite television has accordingly not liked to have long thoughtful discussions about Iraq's Shia Arabs and their near universal approval of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq—not much really about Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the preeminent Shiite divine, who has usually encouraged cooperation with the Americans and always encouraged the advance of democracy; not much either on the failure of Muqtada al-Sadr, the rabble-rousing young cleric, to oppose violently the American presence in Iraq. (As long as Sadr could be depicted as an insurgent in the Sunni Arab media, he was a hero.)

Effects of Arab Media Coverage

January 30 and the coming of Iraq's newly elected national assembly will make the past prejudice extremely difficult to maintain. A decent bet today would be that most of the Sunni Arabs who watched the Iraqi elections on satellite television probably both admire and feel ashamed of what happened. However much they may admire the Iraqis for defying the violence to vote in massive numbers, they are also probably ashamed that the Shia displayed such courage, while in their own countries they do not. (It is not at all contradictory for an Egyptian to hope that January 30 will help end President Hosni Mubarak's despised dictatorship and yet feel a bit sickened that it is Shiite Arabs—the black sheep of the Arab Muslim family—who are leading the faithful to a democratic rebirth.) And it is certainly true that the enabling hand of the United States provokes great waves of contradictory passion. It is worthwhile to note that these same emotions are common among the Iraqi Shia: The more religious and nationalistic they are (and the two impulses are quite harmonious among the Shia), the more difficult they find it psychologically to accept their freedom from the Americans. But the Shia have—with the possible exception of the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr—gotten over it. So likely will the average non-Iraqi Sunni Arab who wants to see elected leadership in his native land.

But our Muslim “allies” in the Middle East are much less likely to get over it. They saw on television what their subjects saw: the American toppling of Saddam Hussein has allowed the common man to become the agent of change. This is particularly gripping in a region historically addicted—at least the leaders would like to so believe—to a top-down political identity. Go to Jordan, one of the more “progressive,” “pro-American” states in

the region, and the omnipresence of pictures of King Abdullah, often next to pictures of his late father, King Hussein, does the opposite of what the picture-hangers intend: it suggests a fundamental uneasiness about the monarchy's legitimacy. (As the Hashemite state continues to spend much more than the state can earn, this sense of unease will undoubtedly rise even further. Fiscal profligacy, both in Egypt and Jordan, will continue to be a driving force behind the popular desire to see the political systems open up.)

Just imagine the possibilities of pan-Arab dialogue when Iraq begins to broadcast the debates within the new national assembly. And remember, the Iraqi national assembly, not the new president, prime minister, and other cabinet officials, is likely to remain the real power center in Iraq, at least until a new constitution is written. Iraqis are a diverse people—though not as diverse as many Western commentators proclaiming “civil war is here!” would like us to believe—and they will have vivid arguments about what belongs in their basic law. It will not be hard for Arabs elsewhere, even for the most Shiite-cursing, American-hating Arab Sunnis who loathe the American-supported dictators above them, to find common ground and aspirations in these debates, which will likely be the most momentous since Egypt's literary and political elite started taking aim at (and advantage of) British dominion over the Nile Valley in the early twentieth century. If the Bush White House were wise, it would ensure that all parliamentary debates are accessible free via satellite throughout the entire Middle East. Such Iraqi C-SPAN coverage could possibly have enormous repercussions. For just a bit of extra money, Washington should dub all of the proceedings into Persian, remembering that Baghdad's echo is easily as loud in Tehran as it is in Amman and Cairo. The president has stated that he wants to stand by those who want to stand by democratic values. This is easily the cheapest and one of the most effective ways of building pressure for democratic reform.

Recalling 1967, or for that matter virtually any memorable date in contemporary Arab history before the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, reminds one acutely how painful the process of Westernization has been in the Near East since Napoleon landed at Alexandria in 1798. The Muslims of the Middle East have tried variations of every intoxicating bad Western idea that promised quick power to peoples, especially to their leaders, whose historical memories were built by a militarily victorious faith. By and large, certainly among the elites,

they drank voluntarily and rapaciously. And the results have been awful.

Fertile Ground for Democracy

There are many reasons why the World War II generation of Western diplomatic and journalistic Arabists hated Zionism and the creation of Israel with a passion that occasionally rivaled the Austrian anti-Semitism of the 1920s and 1930s. But among the most important reasons is that they could see the old Middle East, with all its complexities and warmth, coming apart. Zionism and Israel became the cutting edge of the Western whirlwind that was robbing them of their beloved world. By the late 1960s, ugliness was on the march in architecture, language, culture, politics, and manners, and the old-school Arabists locked onto Israel, and later the United States, as the culprit. This was an odd inversion of history—making Arab Muslim pride and curiosity about the secrets of the West derivative of Zionism—but the sadness that often drove this anger is understandable. The January 30 elections in Iraq are probably the first truly happy, powerful echo of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt. In this at least, the French today can take pride.

The democratic ethic is trying now to put down deep roots in Iraq; the democratic spirit, however, has been present in the Middle East for a lot longer. The understanding of it has grown as tyrannies have failed (but continue to rule on), elite corruption has skyrocketed, and the number of those who have known the penalties for political deviation has risen to produce a counterculture of resistance, pride, and small-scale heroism. Not that long ago, Muslim Arabs could look at Asia and feel no shame. Not now. The civilizational gap has become too wide. And unlike fifty years ago, when Arab dictators and their peoples could believe that state power could raise nations up, now they know—and they really do know it—that their societies cannot produce capitalist dictatorships that work. Hosni Mubarak probably does not really care about this. That he rules is enough. But the apparatus below him does. What the Bush administration wants to do is target its message at that apparatus, particularly at the security service that must

evolve or crack for there to be political change in Cairo. Rapid change in Egypt is certainly possible. Go into the streets of Cairo and ask the poor urbanized fellah whether he understands one man, one vote, and you will discover that he has an understanding that vastly exceeds his experience of democratic politics (zero). He has learned by seeing the opposite. So let us bring on C-SPAN Iraq, and let his education grow the only way it now can. In Iraq, where Middle Eastern tyranny

reached its zenith, the appreciation of democracy’s possibilities is surely the most acute. America’s presence in the country—its political guidance, however errant—has been essential in setting the stage for the great debates that will shortly be upon the Iraqis, the Arab world, and us. As those debates unfold, we would be wise to remember a few simple truths about Iraq, and particularly about the Iraqi Shia.

First, *contrary to the rising chorus of Democratic commentary on the Iraqi elections, Iran was the biggest loser on January 30.* The United Iraqi Alliance, which seems certain to capture the lion’s share of the vote, is not at all “pro-Iranian.”

Neither is it any less “pro-American” than Prime Minister Iyad Allawi’s al-Iraqiyya list, unless you mean that the various members of the Alliance have been and will continue to be less inclined to chat amicably with the Central Intelligence Agency, which has been a longtime backer of Allawi and his Iraqi National Accord. (This is not to suggest at all that Allawi is a CIA poodle.) A better way to describe the United Iraqi Alliance, if it lasts, is as Iran’s worst nightmare. It surely will cause the clerical regime enormous pain as the Iraqis within it, especially those who were once dependent on Iranian aid, continue to distance themselves ever further from Tehran. Primary point to remember: Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who is now certainly the most senior Shiite cleric in both Iraq and Iran, who is of Iranian birth and early education, has embraced a democratic political creed that is anathema to the ruling mullahs of Tehran. Ali Khamenei, Iran’s senior political cleric, is in a real pickle since he cannot openly challenge Sistani and his embrace of democracy. Iran’s relations with the new Iraq would cease to exist. Also, the repercussions inside the Iranian clerical system would not be healthy. Sistani is the last of the truly great transnational Shiite clerics, and his following inside

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Iran, particularly since he has so publicly backed a democratic franchise, which if it were applied in Iran would shatter clerical power, should not be underestimated. Sistani and his men know very well that the political game they play in Iraq will have repercussions throughout the Arab world and Iran. He and his men are not rash, but there will be no tears shed on their side if Iraq's political advancement convulses those clerics in Iran who believe in theocracy.

Second, *we are lucky that Iyad Allawi's moment has passed*. Spiritually and physically, Allawi would have kept the new government in the Green Zone, the surreal, guarded compound in central Baghdad where the American embassy is located. The United Iraqi Alliance will ensure that it is in all aspects pulled out. No real political progress among Iraqis can be made unless the Green Zone becomes a memory of occupation.

Third, *the United Iraqi Alliance and the Kurdish slate will probably start to review closely America's and Allawi's army, police, and intelligence training programs. This is all to the good*. We have had enormous problems with these programs, in part because we have tried to incorporate Sunni Arabs who were not loyal to the new Iraq. The Alliance and the Kurds will be much more demanding than was Allawi, who built his outreach program to Sunnis in large part on bribery. By offering them jobs in the new army, police force, and intelligence service, Allawi led Sunnis to believe their positions in these organizations would not be subject to democratic politics. Allawi actually created the opposite dynamic among the Sunnis from what he intended. The Sunni insurgency was emboldened. Those elite Sunnis who should have felt the need to compromise and come on board did not do so. With the January 30 elections, the Sunni Arabs now know the old order is dead. The Shia and the Kurds will certainly reach out to them—Sistani has been doing so since Saddam fell—but they are unlikely to continue

any form of bribery that touches upon Iraq's military services. Washington should welcome any change of tactics in this direction. Allawi's way was not working.

Fourth, *if Ahmad Chalabi gains a position of influence inside the new national assembly, it would be wise for State and the CIA to ensure that any and all officials who were involved in his regular trashings—particularly the trashing of his home—do not serve in Iraq*. The Bush administration is going to have a hard time working with and figuring out the Iraqi Shia (it is striking how thin U.S. embassy coverage of the Shia still seems), and it does not need to further antagonize one of the few Iraqis capable of appreciating both the religious and secular sides of the Iraqi Shiite family and who can present his understanding to the Americans in a way they can understand. Ahmad Chalabi may be wrong in his assessments—he has certainly made mistakes in the past—but the Bush administration is doing itself an enormous disservice if it allows the old State-CIA animus against Chalabi to continue any further. Irony is always both bitter and sweet. Tell Langley to live with it before Chalabi has the will and allies to get even.

And fifth, *continue to pray every night for the health, well-being, and influence of Grand Ayatollah Sistani*. Not surprisingly, there seems to be an increasing body of American liberals out there who foretell the end of a "liberal Iraq" because religious Shia now have a political voice. It is a blessed thing that Sistani and his followers have a far better understanding of modern Middle Eastern history than the American and European liberals who travel to Iraq and find only fear. There are vastly worse things in this world than seeing grown Iraqi men and women arguing about the propriety and place of Islamic family law and traditional female attire in Iraqi society. Understood correctly, it will be an ennobling sight—and a cornerstone of a more liberal Iraq and the Muslim world beyond.