



February 2005

Iraq Has Voted

By Michael Rubin

Millions of Iraqis went to the polls on January 30 and demonstrated, under extreme duress, that they are prepared for freedom and for the responsibility of transforming their nation from tyranny to democracy.

Braving bullets and bombs, millions of Iraqis cast their ballots on January 30 in Iraq's first free elections in half a century. First reports suggested turnout in excess of 70 percent. While the Independent Election Commission of Iraq has not yet announced the official results, the encouragingly high voter turnout undercuts the cynicism of a press corps and politicians that questioned the election's legitimacy before the first ballots were even cast. The Associated Press, for example, opined, "If the vast majority of the Sunnis shun the polls—either out of fear or lack of confidence in the process—it would undercut the new government's legitimacy." On ABC's *Nightline*, Jesse Jackson Jr. asked, "What constitutes a legitimate election? . . . 80 percent? 70 percent? 60 percent turnout?"

Such questions misunderstand both Iraq and the elections. The election marks a historic transformation in Iraqi society. In 2000 and 2001, I lectured at three different Iraqi Kurdish universities. Without exception, my University of Baghdad-trained translators stumbled over words like "tolerance," "debate," and "compromise." Such concepts simply did not exist in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Introduction of these concepts was hardly instantaneous upon Iraq's liberation. When Baghdad fell on April 9, 2003, many Iraqis, intoxicated with a misconceived notion of liberty, took to the streets, looting public buildings. Muhammad Hussein al-Zubaidi used his new freedom to proclaim himself mayor of Baghdad and tried to withdraw

millions of dollars from Iraqi banks. On April 10, followers of firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr confronted and then hacked to death returning cleric Majid al-Khoie. While Iraqi newspapers blossomed, they often published slander rather than news. Iraqi journalists explained that democracy meant they could print whatever they wanted.

Initially, Iraqis voiced maximalist demands. In May 2003, Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Masud Barzani told an international property restitution fact-finding committee that even third-generation Arab residents should leave Kurdistan and never come back. Turkmen and Assyrian groups demanded their own federal states in northern Iraq. At the University of Basra, pro-Iranian gangs plastered professors' offices with pictures of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution, and threatened anyone who dared take them down. In the Kadhimiya section of Baghdad, Islamists posted religious guards in front of secular schools, prohibiting unveiled girls from attending class. Watching American officials excavate mass graves of Saddam's victims near the ancient town of Babylon in May 2003, Iraqis demanded summary execution for all two million Baath Party members.

As they grew accustomed to their new freedoms of speech, assembly, and movement, however, Iraqis shed their isolation. In August 2003, I drove from Baghdad to Duhok, a mountainous town in Iraqi Kurdistan with Ali, a Shia from Basra. He grew nervous as we approached the line that since 1991 had divided Saddam's Iraq from the Kurdish safe haven. Just four months earlier, visiting Kurdistan would have been cause for interrogation if not imprisonment and

Michael Rubin (mrubin@aei.org) is a resident scholar at AEI. A version of this article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 31, 2005.

execution. More than two-dozen abandoned Iraqi police checkpoints testified to the internal travel restrictions the previous regime had imposed upon ordinary Iraqis. A burned-out tank on the outskirts of Kirkuk, freshly painted with pink flowers, marked the location of an infamous checkpoint where police summarily executed Kurds. Ali worried about how the Kurds would treat him. As a conscript during the 1980s, he had served in the area with the Iraqi army. His anxiety was misplaced; two days later he left Duhok with a trunk full of figs given to him by euphoric Kurds, eager to break free from years of isolation.

With travel restrictions lifted, Iraqis rediscovered their country. Arabs booked Kurdish hotels a solid five months in advance. Kurdish colleagues from the University of Sulaymani visited college friends in Basra for the first time since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. Freedom to travel moderated religious extremism. "During Saddam's day, I didn't know much about Iran. I figured since it was a Shia government, it would be a utopia," a Shia schoolteacher told me in a Karbala coffee shop. "Now that I've been to Iran, I realize how wrong I was." As Iraqis were allowed to study the teachings of traditional scholars, populists like Muqtada al-Sadr hemorrhaged support. In the alleys and squares around Shia shrines in Kadhimiya, Karbala, and Najaf, merchants began selling not only long-banned religious books, but Western magazines as well.

Despite doomsday predictions of civil war, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen learned to compromise. In May 2003, under the watchful eye of a colonel from the 173rd Airborne, Kurds displaced from the Kirkuk region negotiated with Arab farmers to divide the wheat harvest. Before re-flooding marshes drained by Saddam Hussein's government and given as agricultural land to Baathist loyalists, fishermen and farmers sat down in al-Amarah to discuss revenue sharing and compensation.

Democracy is a process, and Iraq has only started along its arduous path. But already, the transformation is vast. In January 2004, in the southern Iraqi town of Nasiriya, hundreds packed an auditorium for a town-hall meeting. For three hours, residents peppered their mayor and city councilmen with questions ranging from electricity rationing to property disputes to questions regarding licensing of a local radio station. The Iraqis raised their hands and made their statements with respect. They had learned the meaning of tolerance, debate, and compromise. In February 2004, I witnessed a similar scene in the largely Sunni Arab city of Baquba. Across the Arab world, politicians lecture to the people. Only in Iraq is the opposite true.

Iraq's new reality is reflected in its politics. At a political rally earlier this month, a former exile who returned to Iraq last year began crying. "This is the first time I've heard politicians campaign in Arabic," he explained. This fact has not gone unnoticed in the greater Middle East. "It is outrageous and amazing that the first free and general elections in the history of the Arab nation are to take place in January: in Iraq, under the auspices of American occupation, and in Palestine, under the auspices of the Israeli occupation," Jordanian columnist Salameh Nematt wrote on November 25, 2004, in the pan-Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*. Baghdad is awash in campaign posters. Television and radio commercials vie for the electorate's attention.

Iraqis themselves will determine the legitimacy of their first elections. The views of Jordan-based United Nations and international election observers will be largely irrelevant. Judging an Iraqi election from Amman is the geographical and political equivalent of monitoring an American poll from Havana.

Some Iraqi politicians may also disparage the poll. Sunni elder statesman Adnan Pachachi, for example, told BBC Radio on January 8 that any Sunni boycott would render the elections "illegitimate." But a Sunni-Arab boycott no more invalidates an Iraqi election than an Afrikaaner boycott would in South Africa. Pachachi himself may be less motivated by a desire for inclusion than by a realization of his own political woes. A January 10-19 State Department poll found that Pachachi's Independent Democratic Gathering list polled an average of 1 percent across Iraq. In contrast, the United Iraqi Alliance endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani drew almost 40 percent of the vote. That losing politicians disparage an election's legitimacy is nothing new. It is politics.

That no political party is likely to win an absolute majority bolsters the election's legitimacy. While the Arab Middle East is dominated by single parties and strongmen, the transitional Iraqi government will be a coalition. Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shia are meeting to strike deals and hammer out policy. Not all Iraqis will choose to vote, but they now have a choice of candidates and parties denied to millions of Egyptians, Saudis, and Syrians, let alone more than a billion Chinese. Iraqis may fear violence, but they no longer fear speech or thought.

President Bush recently spoke of the success of the elections, saying, "Today the people of Iraq have spoken to the world, and the world is hearing the voice of freedom from the center of the Middle East." That voice of freedom may still be young, but Iraqis have already determined that it cannot be silenced.