Pre-poll situation in Iraq

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By Najmuddin A. Shaikh

IN another four days, the people of Iraq, or at least some of them, will go to the polls to select a 275-member national assembly. They will, in theory, be joined in this electoral exercise by as many as one million expatriate Iraqis deemed eligible to vote at 74 polling sites set up in countries like Jordan, Syria and Iran on the one hand, and in Sweden, Britain and the US on the other.

However, the exercise of registering eligible Iraqi voters abroad has proved disappointing. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), that has the contract from the Iraqi government to organize polls managed abroad, had until Friday, the last day for registration, to register only some 131,000 Iraqis. It has, therefore, been forced to extend the date for registration by two days and to relax conditions for doing so. The two documents required for registration earlier have now been reduced to one document — a current or old Iraqi passport.

It seems unlikely that the additional time has added significantly to the number of Iraqis who will vote abroad. At best, some 200,000 will register and vote. Since the IOM has been given some $92 million, each vote cast outside Iraq is going to cost the Iraqi exchequer about $500. The poverty-stricken citizens inside Iraq will find it difficult to accept this figure, particularly when they know that the entire exercise was designed to give a boost to the electoral chances of Iraqi candidates who spent long years in exile and had no base of popular support within the country.

In Iraq itself it is estimated, based on what appears to have been some fanciful polling carried out by various organizations, that the turnout in the Shia areas will be about 90 per cent, in Kurdish territory about 80 per cent and in the Sunni triangle about 40 per cent. Since President Bush himself conceded that holding elections would be difficult in four of Iraq's 18 provinces (the four provinces are estimated to be home to 50 per cent of the population) it is clear that these figures bear little relationship to the ground reality.

Further examination of the latest statements suggests that even within the Shia community there are divisions on the question of voting. For most Shias, [illegible]

is overwhelmingly indigenous. Its local leaders probably receive assistance and direction from Baathist Iraqis in Syria or in safe houses along the Iraq-Syrian border. They may make common cause with Zarqawi in the struggle against the US forces and their local collaborators, but any claim that Zarqawi is the leader of the resistance, or that the Iraqi insurgents have bought his extremist views and his sectarian bias, lacks credibility.

Sunni religious leaders have joined their Shia counterparts in denouncing the violence. After the horrendous attack on a Shia mosque and wedding party last Friday, Sunni and Shia clerics denounced the violence and called for maintaining the centuries-old amity between the Shias and Sunnis in Iraq, even as Shia clerics urged their followers to vote and the Sunni clerics to boycott the polls.

There is no doubt, however, that the sectarian divide is growing despite the best efforts of religious leaders on both sides. There is also no doubt that many Iraqi politicians fear that the elections will exacerbate the divide and bring Iraq to the brink of a civil war if the boycott of elections leaves them only nominally represented in the post-election power structure.

The Americans and the Shia leaders seem to be well aware of this. Malek Dohan al-Hasan, a Shia and the justice minister in the interim government, has warned his co-religionists to protect minority rights, especially those of the Sunnis staying away from polls. Al-Hasan asked the Shias to look around and to see that "You are in an Arab Sunni region. Who will come to your aid if you monopolize power?" The interior minister, Falah Hassan al-Naqib, has also warned that the country risks sliding into civil war if the Sunni Muslim minority boycotts the elections.

representative are these likely to be; how honest and free, and most importantly, how big a turnout will the organizers be able to arrange?

First, some unprecedented security steps have been announced. All Iraq's borders will be sealed three days before the polls with only Iraqis returning from Haj being allowed in during this period. There will be a three-day public holiday. All inter-city vehicular traffic will be prohibited for these three days. Baghdad airport will be closed for two days. There will be an extended curfew throughout the country. No one will be allowed to carry weapons. In many areas, the location of the polling stations will be kept secret until the last moment. The difficulties these measures create will lead to a situation where only the truly enthusiastic will turn out to vote.

Such enthusiasm is probably going to be difficult to generate among people who have already to contend with daily power outages lasting 20 hours, long lines for petrol and cooking fuel and water shortages.

Second, it has been announced that there will be a three-ring security parameter around the polling stations. The outermost ring will be manned by quick reaction forces from the coalition. The second ring will be the Iraqi army and the third nearest the polling station will be manned by the Iraqi police. There are to be about 6,000 polling stations. Theoretically, there are a 120,000 Iraqis who have been trained. This figure has been termed "malarkey" by Senator Biden when it was forward by Condoleezza Rice during her confirmation hearings. Biden estimated that the correct figure was 4,000 which he subsequently amended to 14,000. Ambassador Negroponte claimed that some 70 Iraqi battalions had been trained. This would mean, one assumes, some 70,000 men since the Iraqi army battalion usually is a 1,000 strong.

Clearly, this figure is on paper. In reality the number of trained people is probably closer to the Biden estimate. Were that not so the Americans would not be sending special team after special team to Iraq to determine how the training regime could be improved and accelerated. The Iraqi people will know particularly in the four troubled provinces that the Iraqi forces will provide little security. They will know also that these forces are regarded as being infiltrated by the insurgents and will, in many cases, help rather than hin-

> The exercise of registering eligible Iraqi voters abroad has proved disappointing. The authorities managed to register only 131,000 Iraqis, and were consequently forced to extend the deadline for adding the names of more Iraqis to the electoral list. But, given the ground realities and the absence of voting fervour among the Iraqis, it is highly unlikely that this extension will see the electoral list grow significantly longer.

voting. For most Shias, the directive of Ayatollah Sistani to cast their vote has the force of a *fatwa* that makes voting a religious duty. There is also a strong sentiment among the Shias that this election represents their chance of getting the share of power long denied to them in the Sunni-dominated power structure in Iraq. On the other hand, there is the influence of Moqtada al-Sadr. He has not opposed the elections openly. But his supporters have, in one fiery speech after another, questioned the validity of the polls in an occupied Iraq and while "our dear Sunni brothers" do not participate.

If there is any good news for the Americans and the Iraqi interim government it is that even though the violence continues and the insurgents appear to be able to attack even such heavily guarded locations as the headquarters of Prime Minister Allawi's party in Baghdad the number of insurgent incidents has not increased. In fact, over the last week there may have even been a decline. It seems that American intelligence has become more effective. The announcement that Zarqawi's principal aide, Abu Omar Kurdi, allegedly responsible for most of the car bombings in Baghdad, had been apprehended along with Zarqawi's propaganda chief and other "terrorists" in the Sunni triangle suggests that significant headway has been made.

Zarqawi had made headlines with a statement (believed to have been issued by him) on a website that "We have declared a fierce war on this evil principle of democracy and those who follow this wrong ideology," and that "anyone who tries to help set up this system is part of it." He had also threatened to intensify efforts to disrupt the elections.

But it would be naove to believe that Zarqawi and the insurgency are synonymous with one another or that crippling his organization would break the back of the insurgency. The insurgency, it is generally acknowledged,

As a result, reassuring noises have been made by Shia leaders. One is that the United Iraq Alliance, the Sistani-backed coalition of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Dawah Party will not, if it wins the elections and hence the right to nominate the prime minister and cabinet, give these leadership roles to Shia clerics. These would be given to prominent Shia laymen. Even otherwise, the clerics will not be given official positions in the government. There have also been noises about Sunnis being included in the government even if they do not qualify on the basis of the vote.

The Americans have been engaged for some time in trying to get the Sunnis to participate but have balked in a meeting with Sunni leaders at the condition that they set a date for withdrawal. Currently, their effort seems to focus on getting Shia leaders to agree to give the Sunnis a fair share of representation in the post-election government.

Ambassador Negroponte made the point that "even with respect to the Sunni areas, a lot of people are thinking about if, indeed, they are underrepresented in the national assembly, might there be other ways to involve them in the political process?" Referring to the fact that there would have to be people selected for the three-man presidency, the cabinet and the constitution drafting body, he said that "people here are looking at ways to include all elements of Iraqi society in these very, very important future political steps."

The fact, however, is that in the current Shia-dominated government there has been little effort at getting Sunnis into positions of power. Many suspect that American persuasion notwithstanding not much will be done in this direction in the post-election period unless there is some sort of formal agreement between the Shia and Sunni leaders. But to return to the elections; how democratic and ness would be required for the voter to venture out under these precarious circumstances.

Third, owing to the security situation, there has been virtually no canvassing by the candidates. There is no personal bond between the voter and the candidate. The candidates or their party can provide little assistance to the voter to get to the polling booth. The indifference this generates may be overcome in the case of Shia voters by the Sistani directive, but for the others there are only calls that reinforce the indifference.

As if this were not enough to ensure a low turnout, Mother Nature has also turned unkind. The heavy snowfall in the Kurdish areas in the north will it is feared leave the roads impassable until well after the Sunday election day.

Fourth, this will be the first election in recent years where there will be no international observers. The Americans put together an International Mission for Iraqi Elections with some two dozen experts from various countries including Yemen and Indonesia. But given the security situation this commission has decided that it will operate only from Jordan and will assess the election only on the basis of the reports they receive from the Iraqi election commission and other observers. Will the present government be able to resist trying to manipulate the ballot boxes? Will the independence of the Iraqi election commission really stand up to scrutiny?

Sadly, one can only conclude that despite all efforts the turnout will be low and that the outcome of this low turnover may well be subject to manipulation. It is acknowledged that the election will not mean the end of the insurgency. What is not acknowledged is that there will be an even bigger political mess in Iraq after the elections than there is today.

The writer is a former foreign secretary.