

Iraq: can you see the future?

PLAIN WORDS

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The future of Iraq hangs by a slender thread: its new provisional government, probably inspired by al Qaeda and several other powers that have influence over it. While mainly Sunnis are still heroically resisting the US occupation, Shias under grand Ayatollah Sistani and the Kurds have been rather soft on the Americans. The Sunnis boycotted the recent elections while the Shias and Kurds enthusiastically utilized the occasion to right historic wrongs in Iraq.

A whole new situation has emerged from the polls. No one can call these polls rigged or bereft of popular participation; the turnout was a convincing 60 per cent. Nor can anyone accuse the US of widespread malpractices. This is the first acceptable step that the Americans have taken in Iraq. Only the Sunni parties' boycott of the election has created problems for both Iraq and the Sunni community itself; the latter is virtually without representation, while Shias and Kurds have freely chosen their representatives.

Therefore the first task of the new government will have to be to reach out to Sunnis and to adequately associate them with itself in the all-important task of drawing up a constitution for Iraq that gives due weight and representation to all Iraqi communities, and find ways of a true reconciliation among its three major ethnic or sectarian communities.

This daunting challenge includes reorganizing the badly-damaged infrastructure and social amenities for all Iraqis, in addition to questions of social justice for all.

There is also the perennially tricky question among the Arabs of ensuring full freedom of religious worship and observance of religious rites to all sects and religions, while accommodating the secular appeal of Arab Nationalism à la Nasserites or even Baathists.

The immediate task for the new government is to prevent sectarian strife that can degenerate into a civil war between Shias and Sunnis, and to defeat the machinations of those who do not wish well for Iraq. Iraqis by now should have had a good idea of who their well-wishers are and who do

not want a united and strong Iraqi state. It would be an insult to their leaderships' rationality if they were to rush to their supposed local enemies' throats as a result of foreign intrigue; so far indications were that Sunni and Shia leaderships will be able to — on internal matters — work together.

But the task of ensuring that Iraq stays a united state can become infinitely easier if the various Arab leaderships realize that the only way to convert a richly variegated society into a strong state is to be tolerant of all pluralism, and acceptance of democratic precepts of equality of all citizens before law, and equal human rights for all. Ethnic pluralism demands, and is sure to be satisfied by, the working of the federal principle.

In short, democracy, without an adjective — except 'federal' — is actually a panacea. In the case of Iraq, a federal structure is a must: Kurds' aspirations cannot be left unattended; moreover they have already enjoyed substantive autonomy, even if under foreign pressures. Deny them full autonomy, they may rebel. Kurds' push for independence, on the other hand, can bring in an invasion

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by Turkey. A Kurdish revolt in Iraq can spill over into many other states. The best course for Iraqis is to pay the price of autonomy to the Kurdish North with proper constitutional guarantees, and give them their due so that they do not go for independence. This is necessary for the peace and stability in Arabs' southern neighbourhood.

To revert to the probably manipulated Sunni attacks on Shia Mosques on special religious occasions, it is necessary to examine the motives of all concerned; it is vital to have a good idea of which foreign powers are likely to maliciously orchestrate the transmutation of the anti-American resistance into sectarian strife. It is difficult for distant observers to find out the exact details; otherwise one will have to fall back on independent journalists like John Pilger, David Hirst, Robert Fisk et al; it is best if the Arabs make their own determination of this matter.

The trickiest task would be for Jaafari —

or whoever finally emerges as the PM — to deal with the conquerors of Iraq who are so reluctant to give a date of their departure from the country. They talk of democracy for Iraq, but the pattern of their actions suggests they want the Iraqis to do that which pleases them, and they keep a huge embassy with a whopping budget of \$ 1.3 billion. Why? Their design to have, and keep, all lucrative contracts, chiefly of oil for their companies, and permanent military bases in Iraq has been clear enough. With an occupying power like the US, with its worldwide interests and the kind of commitments it has given to Israel, life for the new government will be hard indeed. But it has to manoeuvre itself through treacherous waters.

Among the assets of the new government one can count two. One is the tradition of secularism fostered by the Baathists and other leftwing elements, especially before Saddam's arrival on the scene, and the Saddam regime was anything but secular. That can make the idea of accommodating and politically reconciling the Shias and Sunnis to be a workable proposition. Then, there is an ideological difference between the politics of the Shia clerics of Iran and Iraq. The kind of semi-totalitarian view of politics — as an offshoot of Islamic ideology — entertained by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran is not fully shared by Ayatollah Sistani, the power behind the new government. His shi'ism is closer to the 1300 year old, rather quietist tradition of aloofness from politics; Sistani can countenance sharing power with non-Shias without violence to his religious ideology, if any.

The main patrimony of Iraq is plentiful oil, a strong attraction for all modern predators. If the resource can be exploited optimally and the proceeds go to meet the day-to-day needs of all Iraqis, the country can be modernized and developed speedily. Much of what happens to, or in Iraq will depend on what the long term aims are of the US and Israel, and the level of democracy in Iraqi governance. This oil can turn out to be a bane or boon for the country.

So what are the ultimate aims of the US and Israel? The intentions of the Neocons in the US and of Israeli hawks are more or less known. Forcing democracy on the Middle East at gun point is phony liberalism; given the logic of the actions of President George Bush's government, one has to look for American motives in the logic of its conduct. Its leadership's role in managing Asia is disquieting indeed; it looks uncommonly like a drive for imperialistic domination. As for Israel, it has always regarded Iraq as a radical kind of threat to its security. Is the view likely to change?

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