

Time running out for Iraqi Shiites

Are the Shiites about to commit the mistake they made in 1920, when they excluded themselves from the government of the newly created state of Iraq? The question is not fanciful. At that time, Shiite religious and social leaders divided the community in two camps: one favouring negotiations with Britain, then the mandate power in Mesopotamia, and the other preaching a boycott of the "crusading power." The latter won the day after being endorsed by senior Shiite clerics in both Najaf and Qom.

The British, determined to transform the mandate territory into a new state, ignored the Shiites and shaped the Iraqi state as they pleased. They imported a king from the Peninsula and set up a bureaucracy based on a few wealthy Sunni families and clans, many with Ottoman antecedents. The Iraqi Shiites found themselves in a strange situation. Their leaders told them that they owed no loyalty to the new state. When the British set up the new Iraqi army, the Shiites again decided to stay away.

Those early errors meant that the Shiites, though they accounted for more than 60 per cent of the population, never received the share of political power they deserved. Of the 24 men who served as prime minister in

successive Iraqi governments between 1921 and 2003, only seven were Shiites (and their total period of service did not exceed six years). The few Shiites who attained major positions in government often did so in a context of open hostility from their own community. More importantly, none of the six men who became heads of state in Iraq was Shiite. The Shiites were also excluded from many key positions in the state apparatus and its decision-making organs. The decision to stay out of the army was equally disastrous. While the bulk of the army consisted of Shiite recruits, Sunni Muslim Arabs and other minorities dominated the officer's corps.

Under the monarchy, Shiites were able to pretty much live their own lives, at least as far as religious rites were concerned. After the 1958 coup d'état, however, successive military regimes tried to control all aspects of Shiite life. In the final years of Saddam Hussein, the Shiite community experienced its darkest days. Millions of its members had been expelled from Iraq by Saddam or had fled into exile. Inside Iraq, most senior Shiite clerics were either in prison or under house arrest, many of their seminaries disrupted or permanently shut

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by the Baathist party. It is important for Iraqi Shiites to remember their tragic experience before they are plunged into another historic mistake by shortsighted and selfish leaders.

Whether anybody likes it or not, the Americans and their British allies are now in a position to suggest, if not actually dictate, the shape of a new Iraqi state. By next month, the American interim ruler of Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, will convene a constitutional conference to pick a provisional authority, the nucleus of a new state. Bremer also plans to create a new Iraqi army of some 40,000. If the Shiites stay away from the new army,

the American "pasha" will have no choice but to calk on the Sunni professional military elites to do the job, thus perpetuating a tradition under which the Iraqi officers corps has always been dominated by minorities.

Iraqi Shiites have just a couple of weeks in which to decide whether or not to take part in the exercise. What is certain is that some predominantly Shiite political groups, including Ahmed Chababi's Iraqi National Congress (INC), will accept Bremer's invitation. But such groups would carry little weight if the bulk of the

Shiite community opts for a policy of boycott. Some Shiite groups are clearly tempted by the idea of boycotting the process in the hope of scoring cheap nationalistic points. Many of these groups are subject to pressure from Iran and Syria to stay away from the Americans.

The recently renamed Supreme Council of Iraqi Liberation, led by Muhammad-Baqer Hakim, is trying to be as ambiguous as possible in the hope of maintaining Tehrans support while not shutting the door in the face of Washington and London. This is a dangerous and ultimately self-defeating attitude that could divide the Shiites at a time when they need the highest degree of unity.

Another Shiite group, led by Muqtada Sadr, a young mullah from Najaf, is trying to seize physical control of as many Shiite neighbourhoods in Baghdad as possible in a reckless game that could provoke a civil war within the Shiite community. A similar policy is pursued by the two rival factions of the Al Daawah (The Call) party with more than a wink and a nod from Tehran. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Shiites look to their chief "Marja al-Taqlid" (Source of Emulation) Grand Ayatollah Ali Muhammad Sistani for

guidance.

Sistani, however, faces a dilemma. He is opposed to the direct intervention of the clergy in politics and has long criticised the Iranian Khomeinist model under which the mullahs control key organs of the state. For Sistani to step in now and assume a political role would require a revision of his well-established theological position with regard to the nature of power and the modalities of its use.

It is time for Sistani to take the full measure of the situation. Whether he likes it or not, he must offer his people with a modicum of political leadership. He must call on all Shiite political parties, groups and personalities to join the process organised by Bremer and help create an Iraqi national authority that can assume control of the nation's destiny as soon as possible.

Because everyone knows that Sistani does not want political power for himself, he would be in a stronger position to encourage the Shiites to play their role in shaping a new Iraqi state and army. By excluding themselves from government, the Shiites could create a situation in which the future Iraqi state and army will also be based on minorities. And that, as history has shown, is a recipe for despotism and disaster.

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