

The spectre of sectarianism

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The parliamentary elections held in Iraq in January 2005 confirmed some facts and brought to light others. The system adopted was one of proportional representation. The entire country was treated as one constituency and rival groups got seats in the parliament that were proportionate with their share of the total vote. In theory, this method is designed to boost plurality and ensure that smaller groups are not excluded from power. In practice, some sections of the population boycotted the elections for sectarian reasons. As a result, a polarisation emerged, with the Shias (150 seats of 275) and the Kurds (75 seats) running the show. Of the 111 groups that contested the elections, only seven secured their presence in the National Assembly, some winning as few as one or two seats. For all the irregularities, the inadequate performance of the Elections Commission, and the absence of international supervision, the mere holding of elections was a feat. But the spectre of rampant sectarianism remains on the horizon.

Sunni Arabs boycotted the elections in the hope of discrediting rival Shia and Kurdish groups. In hindsight, it wasn't a good idea. The tactic harmed not just the Sunnis but all secular Iraqis -- nationalists, leftists and liberals.

Because the boycott was sectarian (Sunni) in nature, it sent ripples through the Shia and Kurdish communities, pushing them to vote along factional lines.

The 60 per cent of voters who showed up largely voted for the sect rather than the agenda of candidates.

The Americans wanted the elections held to contain the escalating discontent in the country. Needless to say, the elections could have been held in early 2004, before the violence worsened. But the US occupation authorities refused to do so at the time, citing security concerns and registration difficulties.

The real reason the Americans stalled was they wanted the Iraqis to agree on a constitutional formula acceptable to the occupation authorities and legitimised in a public referendum. This was a no go, because top Shia clerics wanted the Constitution written by an elected body. The Americans eventually backtracked, issuing in March 2004 the basic law for the administration of the state, according to which the elections had to be held at the latest by the end of January 2005.

The basic law for the administration of the state humoured the Kurds by giving any combination of three governorates the right to veto decisions made by the country's

majority. This concession encouraged Kurds to go to the polls. The Sunni Arab community may have been encouraged to take part in the elections through a parallel concession, but this didn't happen, even though the Sunnis refrained from resisting the occupation for over four months. It had been the US decision to "uproot the Baath" and disband the army that alienated Sunni Arabs and paved the way to insurgency. In the name of religion or liberty, extremists and Saddam loyalists, aided by foreign elements, decided to fight the Americans.

Moderate liberals and leftists called for reconciliation or inter-Iraqi dialogue in hope of finding common ground among the varied strands of the nation, so that elections could go smoothly. Dialogue required a period of calm, a period during which those who took up arms could return to the political game. Efforts towards reconciliation picked up as the Sharm El- Sheikh conference of November 2004 proposed a national dialogue conference, one that Bahrain offered to host. Unfortunately, the proposal fell on deaf ears, for the US administration was in no mood for delays, on account of its own domestic reasons.

Several Iraqi officials and public figures pleaded with Washington to postpone the elections in vain. The Shias, citing a constitutional vacuum, insisted that the elections be held on time. Two months have passed since the elections and the Shias could not form a government. Ironically, the country is now in the throes of the very constitutional vacuum of which the Shias once warned. I fail to understand why the Shia list objected to a conditional postponement for a few weeks or even months. Public support to the Shia list was guaranteed, for it had the blessing of top Shia clerics. Had the elections been postponed, the Arab Sunnis could have been persuaded to participate, thereby boosting the credibility of the entire process. Had the Arab Sunnis continued their boycott, it would have been harder to fault the way the Shias acted.

The elections didn't bring the end of occupation any closer. So long as the Iraqis are divided, the occupation will endure. Those who truly want to see the occupation ended should start by seeking national unity. Those who oppose elections under occupation are wrong. History doesn't support their argument.

The Palestinians held elections under Israeli occupation in 1996 and elected Yasser Arafat. India and many African countries won their independence through elections held under occupation. Nations have the right to demand free and fair elections held under international supervision. This is something the Iraqi government will have to address at some point.

Indiscriminate violence failed to stop the elections or tarnish its legitimacy. Ironically, the violence hurt those it claimed to help, and helped those it aimed to hurt. Without the boycott, the National Assembly would have had an extra parliamentary bloc of perhaps 40 to 60 deputies, a matter that would have brought balance to the political process. Parliamentary democracy could resolve much of Iraq's problems. Next year, elections must be held on time and hopefully Iraq's political groups would have learned from their past mistakes.

As for the country's future, several questions need to be answered. First, what will Sunni Arabs do in the next elections? Most moderate Sunni Arabs are now convinced that their community should get ready to contest elections. But will the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars play a role similar to that played by top Shia clerics in the past elections? If so, sectarian division and the quota system will become facts of life. Is it possible that a multi-factional religious front -- a front that transcends sectarian schisms, particularly the schism between the Association of Muslim Scholars and Al-Sadr's supporters -- would emerge? And would such a front embrace an agenda to end the occupation first? If so, the secular part of the nation may again find itself in dire straits.

Second, how will top Shia clerics act during the next elections? Will they favour one side with their "blessing" or act impartial observers? Some people believe that Al-Sistani intervened last time because of the exceptional circumstances brought about by the armed opposition. Al-Sistani has, after all, prevented armed groups from sabotaging the elections altogether. But if everyone agrees to participate, would Al-Sistani refrain from taking sides? Many believe that top Shia clerics are justified to act when the community's interests are at stake. But now that the Shias figure prominently in the government and the parliament, what's the motive for further intervention? Al-Sistani is not calling for an Islamic state, nor does he favour government by mullahs, and yet his continued intervention in the elections may not be helpful. He has, admittedly, refrained from influencing the selection of the new government, but now seems to be having second thoughts. One thing top Shia clerics can do to help the country is to mend fences with their Sunni counterparts and thereby promote national unity.

Third, what are the political priorities of the Kurds once they secure a key role in running the country? Would they give precedence to the parliamentary game or follow their own particularist instincts? Would they find it in their heart to put democracy before ethnicity? The Kurds deserve some credit for not letting the religious current monopolise power in the current parliament. They are natural allies of the secular current so long as they are not carried away by their ethnic

agenda. And they provide a much-needed balance between Iraq's Shia and Sunni Arabs.

Finally, what does the US administration want from Iraq? US policy in Iraq has been so disruptive that one is tempted to think that the disruption is intentional, that it is a gimmick intended to tear Iraq apart and isolate it from its neighbours. Who would benefit from such a policy? Are there people within the US administration who still think that the US should make Iraq a political and economic model for the rest of the region? Iraq's political future hinges on these questions. Their answers will decide whether the country stays together and stabilises, or is pulled apart by sectarian struggle.

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