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The True Meaning of the Iraqi Election: A “Trigger,” Not a “Turning Point”

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The fact Iraq holds a real election for a sovereign government with a legislature with a four-year tenure is an important achievement. It is also one that most Iraqis welcome. A new ABC-Time Oxford Research International poll released in the last few days indicates Iraqis will go into the election with considerable optimism. ABC reports that “Three-quarters of Iraqis express confidence in the national elections being held this week, 70 percent approve of the new constitution, and 70 percent — including most people in Sunni and Shiite areas alike — want Iraq to remain a unified country.”

Most Iraqis Do Welcome the Election

A recent ABC analysis of “Where Things Stand” in Iraq notes that, “Today, faith in the electoral process runs high (with the exception of the disaffected Sunnis) and confidence in public institutions has risen. This is particularly true for the Iraqi Army — up from 39 percent to 67 percent, and the police — up from 45 percent to 69 percent.

“A smaller majority says they are confident in their local and national leaders — but ... basic interest in politics has soared. The percentage of Iraqis reporting such an interest has gone from 39 (November 2003) to 69 today. Asked what sort of government they wish for, 57 percent of Iraqis told us they would prefer a democratic state; 26 percent answered "strong leader"; only 14 percent expressed a preference for an Islamic state.

“... While a slim majority nationwide (51 percent) approve of their local government, sectarian differences are obvious. Iraq's Shiites and Kurds — two populations widely persecuted under Saddam Hussein — are not surprisingly filled with hope and high expectations for the country's current and future political leaders. By large margins, Shiites and Kurds approve of the recently adopted constitution and are confident that the elections will bring positive change. They also give the young Iraqi government generally good marks.

At the same time, any analysis or coverage of the election must be based on an understanding that the election will not resolve any major issue confronting the Iraqi people. It is not a “turning point,” but a “trigger.” It will start a political process during the course of 2006 that will almost certainly determine whether Iraq has a solid chance of emerging out of its present turmoil with stability, as well as the success or failure of the Coalition in Iraq.

But, Will Vote on Ethnic or Sectarian Lines Without a Clear Agenda for the Future

It is also an election where most Iraqis will have to vote for the top of the ticket, or make a choice between key national, ethnic, and sectarian parties without really knowing what given party tickets stand for. Not only are most of the major parties mixes of very different voices and beliefs, but there are 7,655 candidates on 996 candidate lists, and 307 political entities (single candidates and political parties) and 19 coalitions. In Baghdad, for example, the ballot paper has 106 candidate lists with 2,161 candidates for 59 seats in the Council of Representatives. There are 212 political contestants on the national ballot.

The election will focus around a few key parties:

- Iraqi Accordance Front / #618 / Sunni. Led by Adnan al-Dulaymi and Tariq al-Hashimi
- Iraqi National List / #731 / Shi'ite & Sunni. Led by Iyad Allawi
- United Iraqi Alliance / #555 / Shi'ite. Led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim
- Kurdistan Coalition List / # 730 / Kurdish. Led by Mas'ud Barzani
- National Congress Coalition / #569 / Shi'ite & Sunni. Led by Ahmad Chalabi

Most Iraqis, however, will never have seen the candidate lists in full before they go to the polls. The number of candidates also vastly exceeds the number of offices. This time, voting will be by area and not nation-wide. Each of Iraq's 18 provinces will be considered a separate voting district; the number of parliamentary seats allotted to each district is based on the population of the province. There are only 275 seats in the National Assembly, and only 230 will be distributed amongst the 18 governorates according to the number of registered voters in each governorate. The remaining 45 are distributed as compensatory seats to political entities whose proportion of the vote received nationally is lower than the number of seats they obtain. . Political entities will win seats in a governorate in proportion to the share of votes they receive in the election in that governorate.

It is not the final voting totals that will count in terms of how political power evolves over the months to come, or exactly which parties get a given number of representatives in the new national assembly. It is rather how well Iraqis can play "let's make a deal." During the next six months, those elected must create a new government, transform vaguely defined political parties and coalitions into specific courses of action, allocate power by ethnic or sectarian faction, and come to grips with all of the issues raised by the constitution. If they succeed in creating an inclusive structure in virtually any peaceful form, Iraq succeeds. If they fail, the Coalition fails almost regardless of its military success, and that of the new Iraqi forces, and Iraq will move towards division, paralysis, civil conflict and/or a new strongman.

What the Elections Will and Will Not Show

The elections results will provide important indicators, but all will be ambiguous and the election results will not reveal several key aspects of Iraqi politics.

Indicators: Voting in the four most troubled provinces where the insurgency has the most support (Anbar, Salahuddin, Nineveh, and Diyala)

To some extent, the results will show the relative strength of the more centrist Sunnis, and more "nationalist" Sunni insurgent movements, versus the strength of the hard-line neo-Salafi religious extremist movements who oppose voting.

One needs to be very careful, however, about how much can be read into such results:

- (i) Insurgents and pro-insurgents may vote simply to create a counterweight to the Shi'ites and Kurds. One can still support violence and vote.

(ii) Voting pro-Sunni does not mean willingness to accommodate the new government; that will depend on the efforts over the months that follow to define the constitution and the way in which the new government operates.

(iii) Such voting does not mean support for the US or Coalition. The new ABC-Time Oxford Research International poll shows Iraqi Sunnis still decisively reject a US and Coalition role in Iraq. It also reveals they have serious mistrust about the new Iraqi government and armed forces.

While many more mainstream Iraqi Sunnis, and their political and religious leaders, now strongly advocate participation in the elections and government -- and a major effort to work with the system at least to the point of blocking Shi'ite and Kurdish power and amending the constitution -- the more radical Sunni movements strongly oppose this and threaten any Sunnis in their areas of influence who vote.

A coalition of five Jihadi Salaphists groups in Iraq (the Qaeda organization in Iraq; the victorious army; Abu Baker brigades; the Islamic jihad brigade. the brigade of propagation of virtue and prohibition of vice. met and issued the following statement on December 12, 2005::

“What is going on in Iraq and the conspiracy being weaved against jihad and Mujahideen headed by the crusaders and those who agree with them on what is called the political process. This process is like other previous process, they are the satanic projects which aim to degrade the Mujahideen and the creed.

“It is swearing to God the new conspiracy of (Dayton) coming back again, those bad people are trying to get us sit to negotiate with them, and with the infidels and with those who violate the credence of our mosques and homes, the honor of our women for the sake of national unity.

“In the mid of all these bad situations that Moslem are going through including the killing and the detaining of the Sunnis, the role played by the apostates trying not to have Islamic state in Iraq formed.

“...They have reached a solution concerning the political process, coming as follows:

- we reject the political process to God and that we are free from any relations with, or those who have ties with the apostate government of what is so called the political process.
- To join the what so called the political process is religiously forbidden, and it contradicts the legitimate policy of God which is the holy Quran.
- To pursue with Jihad, fighting for the word of God, and to establish an Islamic state.”

More broadly, ABC summarizes its polling on Sunni attitudes on security versus those of other ethnic and sectarian groups as follows: “Sixty-one percent of Iraqis now say they feel security is better than it was before the war; that represents a 12 percent increase since we last asked, and a fairly startling counterweight to the prevalent view in the press.

Having said that, these numbers are driven almost entirely by Shiites and Kurds who were treated so brutally under Saddam Hussein.

“...By contrast, among Iraq's Sunnis — for whom "security" was almost ironclad under Saddam — a whopping 90 percent report their security is worse today. In 2005, the majority of insurgent attacks have been concentrated in four of Iraq's 18 provinces, which are home to roughly 45 percent of the country's population: Ninevah, Al Anbar, Baghdad and Salah ah Din. Attacks have focused primarily on members of the Iraqi Security Forces, members of the Multinational Forces, Iraqi civilians and government officials — as well as foreign diplomatic and media personnel.”

Indicators: Broader Sunni Strength

Sunni attitudes are generally far less favorable towards the government and the elections than Shi'ites and Kurds. The poll found that, “The contrast among Sunnis is stark: Only 27 percent approve of the constitution; 48 percent say they are confident regarding the elections; and only 12 percent believe the government has done a good job.” Many will vote largely to assert a Sunni voice in government as a counterbalance to being excluded, not because they believe that they will be treated fairly, that the political process is working, or that all forms of armed resistance are illegitimate.

The Sunni parties are divided and unproven, and with leaders and candidates whose behavior may be very different in office. The fact the Iraqi Islamic Party supported the constitutional referendum divided key elements of the nascent Sunni political structure. Adnan al-Dulaymi's General Conference of the People of Iraq and the NDC agreed to merge with the Islamic Party to form the Iraqi Accord Front, Al-Mutlaq split with the National Dialogue Council (NDC) and some smaller parties under the name the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue. However, the Association of Muslim Scholars refused to participate on the grounds that multinational forces should first announce a timetable for withdrawal.

A BBC analysis indicates that the key Sunni parties now include the:

Iraqi Accord Front: This list led by Adnan al-Dulaymi has three predominantly Sunni parties and largely supports the constitution:

- General Conference of the People of Iraq (GCPI), led by Adnan al-Dulaymi
- Iraqi Islamic Party, led by Tariq al-Hashimi
- National Dialogue Council led by Khalaf al-Ullayan.

Iraqi Front for National Dialogue: Salih al-Mutlaq heads this list and split the Iraqi Dialogue Council because he opposed the constitution. The list includes the following political groups:

- Christian Democratic Party led by Minas al-Yusufi
- Arab Democratic Front led by Fahran al-Sudayd
- National Front for a Free and United Iraq led by Hasan Zaydan
- United Sons of Iraq Movement led by Ali al-Suhayri.
- Iraqi National Front

The overall numbers of Sunnis voting, and whom they vote for, should be apparent in very crude terms. However, there are many mixed areas in Iraq and Sunnis will sometimes vote for the nationalist ticket or even Shi'ite tickets. The voting for Tareq al-

Hashemi and the Iraqi Islamic Party, one of the largest Sunni Arab political groups, will be particularly important since this group was one of the few Sunni groups to openly endorse the constitution.

A detailed analysis of voting by polling area would allow a rough breakout of the national attitudes of Sunnis versus Shi'ites, and the relative strength of each ethnic group in this election. This would, however, require an analysis that might take days or weeks to actually comb through the data by polling area to distinguish Sunni, Shi'ite, and mixed areas. Such analysis may come earlier for Baghdad and Mosul, but only if someone is organized to do it.

Indicators: Nationalist versus Sectarian and Ethnic Parties

Perhaps the most important indicator would be a major vote for Iyad Allawi and the nationalist parties. The problem is that Allawi did receive money from the CIA during his opposition to Saddam Hussein, and has been cast in much of the campaigning against him as a tool of the US, and many Iraqis see a need to vote an ethnic or sectarian ticket in this election even though the new ABC-Time Oxford Research International poll does not show strong support for religious government.

ABC reports that, "Preference for a democratic political structure has advanced, to 57 percent of Iraqis, while support for an Islamic state has lost ground, to 14 percent (the rest, 26 percent, chiefly in Sunni Arab areas, favor a "single strong leader.")"

The campaign has also led to an increasingly bitter set of exchanges between Allawi and leading Shi'ite politicians in the UIA, and even to threats by the Badr Organization to overthrow any Allawi government that emerged out of the election.

The so-called nationalist parties are also as diverse a mix as the Sunni and Shi'ite parties. Allawi's National Iraqi List includes the:

- Independent Democrats Grouping, led by Dr Adnan al-Pachachi
- Iraqi Communist Party, led by Hamid Majid Musa
- National Accord Movement, led by Iyad Allawi
- Iraqiyun (Iraqis), led by Ghazi al-Yawar
- Iraqi Republican Grouping led by Sa'd al-Janabi
- Arab Socialist Movement
- Qasimi Democratic Grouping led by Qasim al-Janabi
- Society of Iraqi Turkoman Tribes
- Loyalty to Iraq Grouping, led by Shaykh Husayn al-Sha'lan
- Independent Tribal Leaders of Iraq Council led by Ali al-Azzawi
- Islamic Democratic Current, led by Izzat al-Shabandar

Indicators: Voting in the Kurdish Areas

These results will provide some indication of Kurdish strength. It is unclear, however, that the Kurdish political parties have made a truly serious effort to get Kurdish numbers as high as possible. The voting will also not reveal how many Kurds still want independence, the level of tension in the Kurdish dominated areas over issues like oil and Kirkuk, the level of tension between the Barzani and Talibani factions, or the level of tension with other ethnic groups like the Turcomans.

They results will not serve as any prediction of how the Kurds will behave, and be treated, in the very different government to emerge after the elections. Jalal Talibani has already said the presidency will be hollow in the new government structure, and Arab Shi'ites may become more interested in compromise with Arab Sunnis than with the Kurds. The Kurds will also face serious revenue issues as oil for food and aid phase down. They have already largely lost revenue from smuggling.

Non-Indicators: Shi'ite Intentions and Unity

The vote for the Shi'ite coalition ticket will not provide a picture of how flexible or inclusive the main Shi'ite parties will be, or how the Shi'ite parties will behave after the Coalition. The present Prime Minister, Ibrahim Jafari, is seen as both popular and weak, but no clear alternative has as yet emerged. Many feel that Deputy President Adel Abdul Mahdi has emerged as a strong potential leader, but much depends on the election results for the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) is still the key Shi'ite party and will probably remain an umbrella coalition of Shi'ite parties after the election. Its status, however, is much more uncertain than in the January 2005 election. The key parties still in the UIA are the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Islamic Al-Da'wah or Dawa Party; members of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's movement, and these parties have many internal tensions. For example, one Sadr supporter, Fattah al-Shaykh, seems to have dropped out because of Sadr failure to adopt a decisive stand "on participation in the elections." A number of former UIA participants have left to form or join other parties and coalitions.

Key UIA leaders like the Moqtada Al-Sadr and Abdul Aziz Al Hakim differ sharply over critical issues like federation. Sadr strongly opposes it, and Hakim strongly favors it. Sadr is always an explosive political uncertainty, and has reasserted himself as a major political voice in Baghdad, Basra, and elsewhere as well as a major anti-US voice. Hakim's post election political role could be particularly critical because he is the leader of the Shi'ite Islamist Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and plays a major role in the actions of the Badr Organization, which is blamed for many of the Shi'ite attacks on Sunnis. He also has ties to the present Minister of the Interior, who is blamed for tolerating some of the abuses by government prisons and the special security units.

Ahmad al-Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress and the Constitutional Monarchy Movement were part of the UIA in the last election but left to form the National Congress Coalition. The role that the ever-ambiguous Ahmad Chalabi will play will also be important, however, as will the role of the most important unelected figure in Iraq, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Sistani's role may be particularly critical in deciding how seriously Shi'ites pursue separatism under the guise of federation, versus inclusive politics and national unity.

National polls do show less support for a religious type of government, and local reporting shows some dissatisfaction with local religious governments. However, hard-line Shi'ite factions control Basra and a significant part of Baghdad, and even if the

national leaders have cohesive positions, it is not clear how well they will speak for local government and politics in the Shi'ite dominated provinces.

A BBC analysis provides the following breakout of the diverse elements within the key largely Shi'ite parties:

United Iraqi Alliance: Led by Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim. The UIA has some 18 member parties, and includes the following political groups:

- Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Al-Sayyid Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim.
- Al-Sadr Bloc
- Islamic Da'wah Party - General Headquarters
- Islamic Da'wah Party - Iraq Organization
- Al-Fadilah (virtue) Party
- Centre Grouping Party
- Badr Organization
- Al-Adalah (justice) Group
- Hezbollah Movement of Iraq
- Sayyid al-Shuhada (master of martyrs) Movement
- Iraqi Turkomans Loyalty Movement
- Islamic Union of the Iraqi Turkomans
- Justice and Equality Grouping
- Iraqi Democrats

National Congress Coalition: Led by Ahmad al-Chalabi and combining his Iraqi National Congress and the Constitutional Monarchy Movement headed by Al-Sharif Ali Bin-al-Husayn. The Coalition includes the:

- Iraqi National Congress
- Iraqi Constitutional Party
- Iraqi Constitutional Movement
- Turkoman Decision Party
- Democratic Iraq Grouping
- First Democratic National Party
- Democratic Joint Action Front

Non-Indicators: Support for the US and Coalition

The new ABC-Time Oxford Research International poll provides a strong warning that voting will not mean an endorsement of the US and Coalition, regardless of what faction Iraqis vote for. ABC summarizes the poll results as follows: "half of Iraqis now say it was wrong for U.S.-led forces to invade in spring 2003, up from 39 percent in 2004.

"The number of Iraqis who say things are going well in their country overall is just 44 percent, far fewer than the 71 percent who say their own lives are going well. Fifty-two percent instead say the country is doing badly.

"There's other evidence of the United States' increasing unpopularity: Two-thirds now oppose the presence of U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq, 14 points higher than in February 2004. Nearly six in 10 disapprove of how the United States has operated in Iraq since the war, and most of them disapprove strongly. And nearly half of Iraqis would like to see U.S. forces leave soon.

“Specifically, 26 percent of Iraqis say U.S. and other Coalition forces should “leave now” and another 19 percent say they should go after the government chosen in this week's election takes office; that adds to 45 percent. Roughly the other half says coalition forces should remain until security is restored (31 percent), until Iraqi security forces can operate independently (16 percent), or longer (5 percent).”

Another ABC report on the situation in Iraq notes that, “Iraqis who do not feel safe tell us they take a variety of measures to protect themselves. Sixty-seven percent say they avoid U.S. forces; one in two stays clear of checkpoints if possible; and 43 percent are careful about what they say in public. Again, these are figures for Iraqis who say they feel less safe than before.

“The impact of security shortfalls remains significant. Violence has hampered reconstruction, in western and central Iraq in particular, and it has meant that badly needed funds for electricity, clean water, education and salaries for health care professionals are spent instead on security. In one stunning measure of “Where Things Stand” in Iraq we found that as of October 2005, approximately \$5 billion of the \$18.4 billion appropriated by the U.S. Congress for reconstruction in Iraq had been diverted to security needs.

“Many parents have become more afraid to allow their children, girls in particular, to attend school, and some Iraqis are too frightened even to visit the doctor when sick.

“... a strange calm pervades some cities where local militias have seized power. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Karbala, a major city in southern Iraq where such militia appear to have infiltrated the police and security forces. It's a development that outsiders, and some locals, view with fear and dismay — how, after all, can the true authorities hold power and garner respect when bands of armed men outside the government set up checkpoints and rule the streets? Yet many locals — in Karbala at least — report that these militias have improved security. An “iron hand” may be at work, and it may be a fleeting calm, but for the moment it is noticed and appreciated.”

It should be noted, however, that the US did make a major contribution to making the election work, regardless of Iraqi political attitudes. The ambassador, embassy team, and senior US officials and commanders pushed hard for the kind of inclusiveness that could keep Iraqi united and give it political hope. US and Coalition forces will provide the most critical aspects of security although this time there will be more Iraqi officials in the field than Coalition forces.

The US Embassy also has reported the following aid efforts:

- Helped to prepare a comprehensive plan and cost estimate for voter registration for election events in 2004 and 2005, which the Iraqi government used to establish the election plan.
- Helped to establish the IECI in time to carry out the January 2005 elections.
- Embedded 14 technical experts within the IECI who worked in full partnership with the UN.
- Provided technical expertise, which led to the establishment of the electoral legal framework that defines Iraq's electoral systems.
- Collaborated with the Iraqi election commissioners to ensure the delivery of public information and commodities, including voting registration kits, printing and shipment of voter registry, and voter education information.

- Implemented a comprehensive, countrywide voter education campaign that targeted Sunni Arabs, women and other minorities.
- Trained 15,000 political party agent observers who were mobilized for the January 2005 Election. USAID also trained and deployed approximately 10,000 accredited domestic monitors throughout Iraq for both the January and October 2005 votes.
- To educate the populace about the content and significance of the constitution, USAID produced and distributed 1.35 million pamphlets and supplements on the constitution in both Arabic and Kurdish; broadcasted Town Hall meetings with members of the Constitutional drafting committee on television, and produced and distributed constitutional posters.
- Conducted 5,000 constitutional workshops reaching over 200,000 people throughout Iraq including women and Sunnis. USAID conducted 861 workshops in Sunni Arab areas alone.
- Women's rights and minority rights were also supported. USAID provided a \$500,000 grant to a coalition of more than 30 women's organizations to advocate for women's rights in a constitutional democracy. A USAID \$10,000 grant went to a minority rights organization that successfully lobbied for the inclusion of minority rights in the constitution.
- Established the Iraq without Violence network of NGOs to monitor violence and mitigate conflict related to the elections.

Non-Indicators: Support for the Current Government

The voting will not show how many Iraqis are simply voting because they fear other ethnic and sectarian groups and are seeking to strengthen their own. It certainly will not reflect faith in the government elected in January. Many Shi'ites see Prime Minister Ibrahīm Jafari as weak and ineffective – some for being too Shi'ite and some for not-being Shi'ite enough. This is of more than passing importance because Jafari remains the leader of both Al Dawa (a key Shi'ite political faction) and the Shi'ite coalition – the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).

Once again, the new ABC-Time Oxford Research International poll provides useful results. ABC report that, “Surprisingly, given the insurgents' attacks on Iraqi civilians, more than six in 10 Iraqis feel very safe in their own neighborhoods, up sharply from just 40 percent in a poll in June 2004. And 61 percent say local security is good — up from 49 percent in the first ABC News poll in Iraq in February 2004.

“Nonetheless, nationally, security is seen as the most pressing problem by far; 57 percent identify it as the country's top priority. Economic improvements are helping the public mood. Other views, moreover, are more negative: Fewer than half, 46 percent, say the country is better off now than it was before the war...The number of Iraqis who say things are going well in their country overall is just 44 percent, far fewer than the 71 percent who say their own lives are going well. Fifty-two percent instead say the country is doing badly.”

Like all of the ABC summaries, these results also need to be put in context. They do not break out the results by province or ethnic/sectarian group. The Shi'ites and Kurds living in the relatively safe provinces have every reason to be far more optimistic about security and life than other Iraqis. Nation-wide results disguise more than they reveal in describing an insurgency that is driven by a Sunni minority that cannot be more than 20% of the total population and which is scarcely united around the insurgents.

As the ABC report on “Where Things Stand Indicates,” “Virtually all signs of optimism vanish when one is interviewing Iraq's Sunni Muslims. There's more on this in the Local

Government section of the report; suffice for now to cite a pair of poll results. While 54 percent of Shia Muslims believe the country is in better shape than it was before the war, only 7 percent of Sunnis believe the same. Optimism about security — 80 percent of Shias and 94 percent of Kurds say they feel safer — is absent among Sunnis. Only 11 percent of Iraq's Sunni Muslims say they feel safer than they did under Saddam.

“Overall, there is a Rorschach-test quality to all this. One could easily sift through the research and field reporting and conclude that Iraq is in danger of collapse; one could almost as easily glean from the same data that there is great cause for optimism.

“At the heart of the "collapse" scenario is a litany of dashed hopes. Many Iraqis cannot understand why — two-and-a-half years after the Americans arrived — electricity and sewage are not more reliable, why more reconstruction projects have not reached their neighborhoods, why corruption remains so prevalent and why their local (and in many cases democratically elected) officials have not changed things for the better.

Yet there are ample reasons for optimism: The burgeoning commerce that now touches nearly all corners of the country; an economy growing, thanks in part to the high price of oil; per-capita income up 60 percent, to \$263 per month; improvements in health care and education; and the widely held belief that next week's elections will make a positive difference. Seventy-six percent of Iraqis told us they were "confident" the elections would produce a "stable government" — and despite the sectarian divisions, few Iraqis express concern about civil war.”

Ironically, even this latter statement illustrates the dilemmas and contradictions in any reporting on Iraq and Iraqi attitudes. The rise in per capita income is a national average based on dividing the total population into the total GNP measured in ppp terms. It is driven as much by a flood of wartime income and aid as oil revenue, and the distribution is unquestionably far less equitable than at the time of Saddam Hussein.

As ABC also notes, “Unemployment overall is difficult to gauge. There is a growing ‘informal economy,’ and many Iraqis have taken second jobs. A U.N. survey published in May 2005 put unemployment at 18.4 percent; this is almost certainly a low-end figure...nationwide unemployment currently hovers between 27 percent and 40 percent.

“...The work rolls remain decimated because of the purging of the old army and much of the old Ba’athist apparatus. Whatever the political benefits or costs of that much-debated policy, there is no question that it put a great many Iraqi men out of work. Further, the Iraqi government no longer finds it practical or feasible to employ the sprawling work force that existed during the rule of Saddam Hussein.”

What Comes After the Elections

Both Iraqi and US officials caution that it may take up to several months after the results to agree on a new government. Even if the period is much shorter, simply dividing up titles in the executive, legislature, and government will not necessarily indicate who actually has power or the capability to use it.

Post-Election Coalitions will be More Important than the Election Results

The coalitions of Sunni, Shi'ite, Kurdish, and nationalist factions that emerge during this process may tell far more about the future than actual voting strength or numbers of legislators. Even then, however, coalitions may shift from issue to issue, and may take on a very different form once the government is actually formed and begins to operate.

Forming the New Government

One key issue will be whether the UIA can win a simple majority – a key issue in the election. If not, the diverse coalitions described earlier must find some way to agree on a national unity government.

The choice of Prime Minister, and of the key Ministers – Defense, Interior, Oil and Finance – may well do more to define power in practice than the elections. So, however, may the kind of legislative alliances that define how the Constitution is completed, amended and interpreted.

Critical areas for political decision-making and the choice of leaders will be:

(i) The requirement that two-thirds of the newly elected national assembly has to agree on the “Presidential council” and the president and two vice presidents who must nominate a prime minister for approval by the assembly. This not only adds a major new political issue to selection of a prime minister, it raises real issues about the real world aftermath. The presidential council seems weak on paper, but could bargain and in any case will be much stronger if the prime minister is not strong and his coalition is weak.

(ii) Whether the Ministry of Defense continues under Sunni leadership, and to emphasize a truly national army and one that is sensitive to Sunni concerns.

(iii) Whether the Ministry of Interior is brought under control, moves away from its recent tendency to tolerate or carry out Shi'ite revanchism, and becomes effective in creating truly national special security and police forces.

(iv) Whether the Oil Ministry has professional leadership and moves forward decisively to renovate oil and gas facilities, and carry out exploration and development of a kind that will ease the tension between factions. There have so far been far too many studies, and far too few tangible actions and results.

(v) Whether the Ministry of Finance gets leadership that can actually manage resources and the budget, bring overspending in other ministries under control, and deal with the necessary compromises over how to handle oil and other state revenues and taxation.

Power versus Voting Results and Law(yers)

The period following the election is much more likely to be an exercise in political power than one in law – particularly because it is politicians who will decide the way that efforts to change the constitution are implemented.

If power is exercised in a moderate and inclusive way, Iraq may well move forward as a unified state. If power becomes polarized, or is used at the expense of Sunnis or “nationalists,” the result can be paralysis, division, or civil war.

Post-Election Timing and Political Dynamics: Politics versus Force

The political dynamics are also demanding. The debate over the constitutional referendum, and the constitution, opened up virtually every key issue in Iraqi politics, and created a process where the constitution needs to be completed and can only be amended by simple majority for a relatively short time. The new government will also inherit a budget deficit, the need to take over management of more of the aid process, and immediate issues over the control of oil revenues.

More importantly, it will inherit an ongoing insurgency and a climate where suicide attacks on Shi'ites and Kurds have been increasingly mixed with Shi'ite military and Special Iraqi Security forces attacks on Sunnis. Even if some or many of the more “moderate” or nationalist Sunni insurgents do come over to the government side, the more extreme and Islamist insurgents face the fact that this is a critical time window in which they must do everything possible to provoke the Shi'ites and Kurds, prevent compromise, and move towards a civil war or at least paralysis and disintegration of the political process.

This also, however, is the time when Shi'ites who want federalism or to dominate Iraq must act politically or through their own efforts at violence, and Kurds who want nationhood must act.

The good news is that many more Iraqi forces will come on line at the same time, and that a successful political process will probably be supported by a successful military and police effort. The two do, however, go in tandem, and a failed or non-inclusive political process could divide the Iraqi armed forces or polarize them against the Sunnis.

Key Post-Election Issues

One needs to be very careful about assuming Iraq's new government must solve every issue at once, or that it must find all such answers soon after the new government is formed. Compromise, delay, and deferral are excellent political solutions; so are half-measures and cosmetic actions. Governments muddle through because political realities force them to, and because “muddling” is far more stable and uniting than acting with clarity and efficiency.

Nevertheless, anyone attempting to interpret the election results must be aware just how many critical issues the last few years, and the debate over the constitution, have unleashed. The new government must deal directly or indirectly with the following practical issues – none of which have been addressed with meaningful clarity by the political parties running in the election.

Finishing and Amending the Constitution

Finishing the constitution left many areas unfinished or ambiguous (some 35-50 laws have to be passed to complete it) and pushed most of the controversial issues off on the new government. This government will have many members of the new assembly –

particularly Sunni -- who ran on tickets calling for amendments to the constitution and sometimes opposing it. The government also faces pressure to act during the four-month period where the national assembly can amend it by a simple majority.

The assembly will probably have to agree on a general and inclusive document at this time in order to present all of its amendments in a single referendum, but – as the discussion below details -- many issues affecting the constitution affect the most controversial political issues affecting Iraq and the new government. There may well be more passion than reason.

There also seems to be some debate over the conditions for amending the constitution. Dr. Jonathan Morrow of the USIP notes that the final amendments to the constitution before the October 15th referendum called for the following process:

--First: The House of Representatives shall form at the beginning of its work a committee from its member to represent the key components of the Iraqi society. The mission of the committee is to present a report within four months including the recommendations of the necessary amendments to the constitution. The committee will be dissolved after presents its suggestion.

--Second: The amendments will be submitted to the Council of Representative for voting and it considered approved if it obtains the majority of the votes.

--Third: The amended articles approved by the Council of Representative (as indicated in item 2 above) will be presented to the people for vote in a public referendum within two months form the date of the approval of the amendments by the Council of Representatives.

--Fourth: The amendment will be agreed upon if it obtains the majority of votes and not rejected by two thirds of voters in 3 Governorates.

--Fifth: Suspension of Article 122 (related to the amendment of the constitution) .The article will return to effect after the changes are made.

Some reporting still talks about a two-thirds majority for the Assembly, and some senior Iraqi politicians have talked as if the assembly vote alone would be enough. Morrow seems to be correct, however, in noting that any package of amendments would be subject to the same terms as the October 15th referendum, and that, “it will be equally difficult for any one political grouping to impose their will on the constitutional text as was last summer (though the Kurdish and Shia parties will no doubt be informed by the knowledge a Sunni Arab vote would probably not be able to defeat a joint proposed amendment from their camps.”

The Political Struggle for Sunni Inclusion

The election can only be a prelude to a much more intense effort to include Sunnis in the political process, convince them that participation is more rewarding than violence and insurrection, and find compromises over revenues, power, control of the Iraqi forces, and other issues.

Sunni politics will also have to evolve. The current parties are more self-selected than legitimate, and there is little unity over issues like the role of religion in the state, the definition of nationalism, how Sunni rights can and should be preserved, etc. The fact Sunni parties lag more than two years behind Shi'ite and Kurdish parties will be a serious issue.

The Kurdish Question

The Kurds will have to define their role in a new Iraq where they do not get preferential financing, oil for food money, or major smuggling revenues. They need to define both their own level of unity and how they will really relate to the rest of Iraq. Issues like control of oil revenues and divided ethnic areas like Kirkuk are already time sensitive. So is the political role Kurds will play at the national level in the new government.

The Problem of Federalism

The Iraqi constitution leaves the definition and practice of federalism so ambiguous that it can border on confederation, autonomy, or separatism. Some form of near-autonomy is vital in resolving the Kurdish question but could tear the Arab portion of the country apart, trigger sectarian separatism and soft ethnic cleansing, and create impossible problems in terms of revenues, oil, control of the Iraqi forces, etc.

The acid test may be the choices Shi'ites make for nationalism over federalism.

National, governorate, and local power

At a different level, the constitution and political processes to date combine to leave major uncertainties over the de facto power of the central government to control given governorates and particularly over the level of independence of local authorities in cities like Baghdad and Basra. These are key practical day-to-day issues of governance versus ethnic and sectarian divisions and federalism, but all interact and affect critical issues like money, power, religion, and control of security forces.

At the same time, the new legislature must come to grips with allocating senior positions at the national level, and defining the relative strength of the prime minister, presidency, ministers, etc. Defining the practical allocation of power at the top often has little to do with electoral results or party leadership. Iraq will have to find its own approach to doing this under a new political system and constitution.

Control of the Military, Security Forces, and Police and Shaping the Role of the Militias

The Coalition has brought Iraqi forces to the point where they should allow significant reductions of Coalition forces in 2006, and Iraqi forces to take over most visible security missions on the ground. If the process is well managed and sustained, it can be a prelude to the withdrawal of all Coalition forces over time, although an advisory role and some enabling and support forces may be necessary through 2010.

Everything will depend, however, on the political dimension, and the effort to bring unity and inclusion. It will depend on creating truly national military and special security

forces, and police who are both effective and serve the cause of unity and human rights – not simply local authority.

Control over (Sharing of) Oil

Oil is the practical symbol of wealth and power. Control over oil revenues is control over some 85% of state earnings, and control over the exploration and development of new and existing oil reserves is already a critical political issue. The constitution leaves this issue ambiguous; political pressure will almost certainly force the issue over the first six months the new government is in session.

These near-term problems are further complicated by pipeline and export route politics; the integration of important aspects of the oil and gas infrastructure on a national level; the lack of refinery capacity and gross overdependence on product imports; and unsustainable subsidized prices for gasoline, cooking fuel, heating oil, etc.

Control of Taxation and Revenues

Money, taxation, and duties will be key issues that extend far beyond the control of oil export revenues, and again help shape the debates over federalism and central versus local authority.

“Balancing” the Budget, Aid, Debt, and Reparations

Iraq does not need to truly balance its budget, but it needs much better fiscal management. The new government inherits a fiscal mess disguised as an annual budget and plan. It will need to show it can takeover much of the aid process in terms of management and execution, and find ways to distribute it more equitably.

The government will almost certainly have to appeal to the US and the world for another major aid effort at a difficult time, and must follow up on the effort to achieve forgiveness of debt and reparations.

Investment Policy

The same issues that can either polarize or unify Iraqi politics are critical to the climate shaping domestic and foreign investment, and suitable laws and regulations still need to be drafted or confirmed.

Defining the Rule of Law

The constitution leaves many ambiguities, as does actual Iraqi practice to date. The issue is compounded by permeating corruption, inefficiency and delay, and a major debate over the role of religion and Sharia in shaping the rule of law. Striking practical differences in interpretation and enforcement now exist at the local level.

Defining the Practical Nature of Human Rights

Like the rule of law, the constitution leaves as many open areas as it closes. In any case, it is practice, not the letter of the law, that counts. Some issues can be deferred and Iraqi standards are not those of the US and EU.

The basic security of the individual, and human rights as they apply to protection of different ethnic and sectarian groups, are issues that cannot be deferred. Soft ethnic

cleansing, enforcement of religious practices, and police and security force abuses are also issues requiring early action.

Defining the Role of religion in the State

Once again, the debate over the constitution almost forces the government to find early solutions and compromises. So does the nature of the political campaign, and Shi'ite and Sunni politics. Inclusive and moderate Islamic solutions will not be a problem. Hard-line efforts, particularly the kind of Shi'ite-dominated efforts like the "555" campaign could be intensely divisive.

Defining the Role of the Coalition and Coalition Forces

Most top Iraqi political figures are aware of how much they need Coalition forces and support. It is clear, however, that this is usually a matter of necessity, not friendship or love. The Iraqi people clearly want the Coalition out; the debate is over. Many new legislators have also campaigned on at least an indirectly anti-Coalition ticket.

The new government will have to come to grips with debates over deadlines for withdrawal, limits on Coalition actions, status of forces agreements, and a host of other issues relating to Coalition forces and influence. It will do so in a largely hostile political environment with new Sunni voices.

Prognosis

This list of problems and issues, and post-election tasks, presents many real challenges. It is important to note, however, that there are few real deadlines and many areas where muddling through and ambiguity will work or buy time. With good political leadership, finding workable approaches should not be daunting, much less impossible. Iraqi public opinion polls also indicate that Iraqis will not insist on final solutions, only ask for a good beginning.

There are still serious problems in creating the kind of police forces Iraqis need to defeat the insurgents and provide security. There also have been growing problems with Shi'ite elements in the Ministry of Interior special security units that have treated Sunnis unfairly and may have attacked and killed Sunnis in political and revenge attacks. There is ongoing progress in both areas, however, and the election takes place at a time when significant overall improvements are taking place in Iraqi forces.

As of early December, Iraqi forces already totaled some 214,000. These included 102,000 in the armed forces under the Ministry of Defense: 101,000 army, some 200 air force, and some 800 navy. They included 112,000 in the police and security forces under the Ministry of Interior: 75,000 police and highway patrol, and 37,000 other MOI forces.

A total of some 130 army and special police battalions, with some 500-800 men each, were fighting in the insurgency. This was 7 battalions more than in late October. A total of 45 were at level 1-3 readiness and "in the lead," Some 33 battalions were in charge of their own battle space versus only 24 in late October.

The key to success will obviously be pragmatism, inclusiveness, and compromise. As such, it will be far more important for the new government to avoid divisive mistakes than have dramatic successes. Post-election Iraq will be a "close run thing," and everything will depend on the quality of Iraq's new leaders. The odds of success, however, are at least even -- if success is defined as a government that can preserve the core of the nation, reach critical compromise, and move forward in ways that steadily diminish both the insurgency and Shi'ite and Kurdish pressures to divide the nation.

One caution would be that insurgents will have every possible incentive to strike at successful political leaders and a successful political process. Those who believe in ethnic and sectarian division also face a critical six- to eight-month time window in which to push their causes at the expense of efforts at national unity. At least for much of 2006, neither Iraqi political success nor a steadily more effective set of Iraqi forces is likely to put an end to a stream of violent acts of terrorism. Politics will often be brutal and anything but pretty. This, however, is not a sign of failure, and it may well be a sign of success.