

Iraq's Politics of Fear

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Articles & Testimony

Until recently, the Iraqi elections on March 7, 2010 seemed likely to showcase the growing maturity of local democracy and offer the United States a chance to claim some success and, more importantly, a mandate to withdraw troops. The election would mark the third time a peaceful transfer of power from one elected civilian-led government to another has occurred since January 2005. The electoral system guaranteed a healthy connection between candidates and local constituencies, the formation of a manageable half dozen major coalitions represented a good balance of nationalist and ethno-sectarian platforms, and it was clear that a future government could only be formed by forging a diverse cross-sectarian and multi-ethnic alliance. So what's the worry?

The key threat to the success of Iraq's upcoming election stems from a decision by the Justice and Accountability Commission (JAC), the successor organization to the deeply politicized De-Baathification Commission. On Jan. 7, the JAC, chaired by Ali Faysal al-Lami, a political ally of Ahmed Chalabi and a current candidate on Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress list for parliament, announced that it was seeking the exclusion of 500 primarily Sunni Arab candidates and 15 political lists from the elections due to their alleged connections to the banned Baath party. Following the commission's ruling, despite the questionable legality of its actions, neither the legislature nor the executive branch leadership have taken steps to quash this inflammatory decision.

Hopes for reversing the JAC's move now fall to a special judicial commission appointed just days ago by the legislature. The names of the appointed judges remain a secret. While the government claims that this is for their personal security, it also reflects the lack of transparency with which the Iraqi government has approached this issue.

The ban will mainly affect candidates from the Iraqiyya coalition, a cross-sectarian alliance dominated by secular nationalists and led by Iyad Allawi, the first Iraqi prime minister of the post-Saddam era. Saleh Mutlaq, one of the three most senior leaders in the coalition, was among the candidates struck from the ballot -- along with all candidates from his party, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue. Wathab Shakir, the Sunni Arab head of the national reconciliation committee, was also banned, alongside numerous candidates of the Unity of Iraq coalition, another cross-sectarian nationalist alliance.

Even if the decision is overturned, damage has already been done. The exclusion of Sunni Arab candidates has coincided with other factors that are reducing public confidence in the success of the elections. Al Qaeda in Iraq continues to plan and undertake mass casualty attacks against government and civilian targets, fueling sectarian distrust and the risk of heavy-handed responses by the predominantly Shiite security force in Baghdad.

On Jan. 12, all movement in Baghdad was abruptly curtailed as the city went into lockdown as a result of a newly-foiled terrorist plot against key ministries. The reaction to this incident -- pervasive rumors concerning an attempted neo-Baathist military coup -- was significant. The rumors were magnified by various military parades and U.S. overflights that attended the Iraqi Armed Forces anniversary, which were misconstrued by a wary Baghdad populace. By manipulating well-justified cultural and historical fears, the Shiite sectarian parties have also stoked fears of a "Baathist return" as part of their election strategy. These concerns have not been effectively assuaged by

the United States and its allies. For example, there was insufficient explanation following the Jan. 8 statement by John Jenkins, the British ambassador to Iraq, warning of a future coup.

Given the makeup of today's Iraqi military -- the vast majority of its leadership are Shiite Arabs or Kurds -- a neo-Baathist coup remains highly unlikely. The political exploitation of such rumors may therefore reflect the nurturing of paranoid identity politics in Iraq by parties, such as the Iranian-backed Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), who performed poorly in last January's provincial elections and fear a transition to issues-based politics. However, such a gambit comes at a sensitive moment for the Sunni Arab community in Iraq. Though patiently enduring, the Sons of Iraq are feeling the heat as their U.S. military allies begin to withdraw and anti-U.S. Sunni militants increase their intimidation attacks. Put simply, when viewed from the Sunni Arab perspective, the atmospherics surrounding the imminent campaign period stink -- and thus, could foreshadow a larger shift away from participation in the established political process.

If hope is still to trump fear in Iraq's ongoing democratic experiment, the Obama administration should work urgently with the Iraqi political leadership in Baghdad to see that the JAC's legally dubious actions are overturned. While unlikely, such a reversal might be possible should the United States, the United Nations, the Arab League, and responsible Iraqi political leaders continue to apply pressure. Whatever the merits of de-Baathification, Iraq's democratic future should not be held hostage by this blatantly politicized ruling.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of [Project Fikra \(/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#). Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer fellow of The Washington Institute. ❖

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