

Iraq's Year of Choices

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Articles & Testimony

A journalist hurling shoes at the president of the United States may be one lasting, if twisted, image of freedom from Iraq, but the multiple elections scheduled for the year ahead are sure to offer others -- and to demonstrate definitively whether Iraq's democratic experiment will be consolidated or will implode. If the incoming Obama administration wants better images than flying shoes in December 2009, it had better be paying attention.

According to the International Republican Institute, Iraq may hold as many as 10 elections in 2009, more than were held in the whole Arab world this year combined. These include the January provincial elections; municipal and district council elections; the referendum on the security agreement with the United States; possible referendums on Kirkuk and on whether the people of Basra want to form an autonomous region in the south like the one in Iraqi Kurdistan; and, finally, the parliamentary elections set for the end of the year.

Each election will provide an answer to a critical question about Iraq's future: Can Iraq break free of paralyzing sectarianism? Can the western Sunnis successfully reenter the political space they abandoned in 2005? Will local authorities secure more independence from central Baghdad? Will there be federal regions in Iraq other than Iraqi Kurdistan? Can Iraq avoid a Sarajevo-like clash over Kirkuk? Will there be a peaceful transition of power from one group of politicians to another? These questions will not be easily answered, and each poses dangers and difficulties for the current government and for the United States, which hopes to be out of the country by 2011, if not sooner.

But beyond planning for the beginning of the drawdown of U.S. forces, the Obama transition team has so far given little indication of its objectives in Iraq for 2009 or of how it will "staff" the problem. What will be the administration's view, for instance, on the Basra referendum? If autonomy for Basra is approved, this vote could lead eventually to the partition of Iraq advocated by Vice President-elect Joe Biden when he was a senator. What is the administration's view on much-needed change to Iraq's parliamentary electoral law? Unless this law is amended, sectarian parties probably will continue to dominate in Baghdad.

If militias or insurgents threaten to disrupt December's parliamentary elections, will the Obama administration seek to secure those elections, even if U.S. troops have already pulled out of the cities? Will a large National Security Council team headed by a deputy national security adviser coordinate policy and make recommendations to the president, or will Hillary Rodham Clinton's State Department take the lead? Will there be a high-powered ambassador in Iraq who is as capable as Ryan Crocker, the current ambassador, or will a vacancy be allowed to linger? Each of these questions needs to be answered soon -- before Iraqis provide their electoral answers.

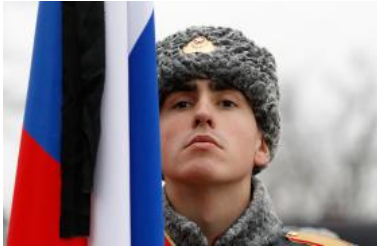
There are many who operate under the illusion that democracy in Iraq remains merely the product of President Bush's ideological imagination. In fact, the Iraqi political process is still the only hope for a fragile nation to reach decisions about its future. Unless the Obama administration vocally indicates its commitment to democracy in Iraq and works to defend the gains that have been made, it may send an inadvertent signal that it cares less about how stability is achieved in Iraq than about stability itself. If party politics is abandoned, only the power of the gun will remain, a troubling prospect for such a highly militarized country. According to the Brookings Institution's Iraq Index, Iraq's security forces stand at 558,279, out of a population of about 29 million. To this figure, 106,000 Kurdish pesh merga can be added, as well as close to 100,000 Sunni Sons of Iraq and some 60,000 in Moqtada al Sadr's militia. Should politics fail, Carl von Clausewitz reminded us, war is its continuation by other means.

President Bush was criticized for risking his presidency by invading Iraq in 2003. President Obama should not risk his presidency through inattention in 2009. The stakes during Iraq's year of elections couldn't be higher -- for the president-elect, the Iraqi people and the United States.

The writer is Keston Family fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of its [Project Fikra \(/template102.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) on empowering Arab democrats. ❖

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