

Return of the Purple Fingers

Jun 9, 2008



Articles & Testimony

Within the next few months, Iraqis will once again wave purple fingers in the air as they cast ballots for provincial governments. As Iraq's parliament debates a law to govern the elections, U.S. diplomats and international experts have an opportunity, if not to correct past mistakes, then to help put local government on the right footing.

This spring, officials in Washington and Baghdad celebrated final approval of benchmark legislation governing provincial powers; Ambassador Ryan Crocker called its March 19 passage "a major step forward." No longer would bureaucrats in Baghdad exert arbitrary control over the provinces, assigning budgets and funding projects irrespective of local desires. Sunni leaders would not be able to drain the Shiite-populated marshes without local consent, for example, nor would Shiite militiamen in ministry offices in Baghdad be in a position to carry out vendettas against Sunnis in Anbar province. And as local faces emerge -- accessible and accountable to ordinary Iraqis -- cynicism about unresponsive Green Zone politicians should decline.

At least, that's how it could be. Much depends on what election law Iraqis choose.

Before the transfer of sovereignty in 2004, U.S., U.N. and Iraqi officials debated how Iraqis should elect their leaders. Ordinary citizens and many liberal politicians sought constituency-based elections: Iraqi politicians would run for defined districts. Every city, town or group of villages would have its representative in parliament. But many communities remained scattered after Saddam Hussein's ethnic cleansing campaigns. Given this, as well as for the administrative ease of organizing elections, the officials agreed to adopt a party-slate system.

It was a fateful decision. Rather than vote for individuals, Iraqis voted for political parties, whose leaders compiled lists of candidates. In descending order, one candidate would enter parliament for every 31,000 votes the party received. Under this system, aspiring politicians owed their future not to voters but to the party leaders who compiled the lists. Instead of encouraging Iraqi politicians to debate security, sewage and schooling, the party-slate system encouraged them to engage in the most extreme sectarian or ethno-nationalist rhetoric to prove their mettle to party leaders. Those who preached tolerance or voiced more technocratic concerns found themselves at the bottom of lists. United Iraqi Alliance leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, for example, would place politicians who toed a Shiite chauvinist line ahead of, say, moderates who sought national reconciliation. Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani tolerated no politician from Kirkuk who prioritized economic development over his hard-line position on autonomy. Demagoguery flourished, and stability faltered.

Reforming Iraq's election system on the national level will be difficult. Every member of parliament is a beneficiary of the system. If the lists are maintained, those whose only qualification is loyalty need never worry about debating the intricacies of infrastructure development with engineers or grass-roots activists. Nor will party leaders drive change. Those who control the lists enjoy their privileged status. They want to be power brokers, not merely representatives.

At the local level, however, there is real opportunity. Before the 2005 elections, one poll showed that only 3 percent

of Iraqis viewed political parties favorably. As ordinary people have been victimized by corruption, abuses of power and party militias, Iraqis say the popularity of political parties and party bosses has fallen even further. Many Shiites, for example, say that they will no longer vote for a unified sectarian list. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani recognizes the trend and will probably not demand sectarian solidarity in local elections. In Anbar, local elections enable the Iraqis there to solidify the past year's gains. For the emergent leadership of the Awakening Council, who earned their credentials on the battlefield against al-Qaeda affiliates, provincial elections mean real representation, whether or not Iraq's Shiite leadership likes it.

Iraqis should have the right to vote for the best individuals to administer governorates and sit on district councils. The country need not abandon parties or proportional representation, but lawmakers could explore an open-list system that would allow citizens to vote for people they know. Even better would be a mixed system, such as the one practiced in Germany, which combines party lists with the ability to elect individuals. Party bosses may resist, but if Iraq is to achieve stability, it would be better to battle in the political and diplomatic spheres now rather than later on the battlefield, with the bosses and militia enforcers clashing on the streets of Basra, Baghdad or Kirkuk.

Not all elections are the same. Systems matter. When preparing for elections, the path of least resistance is not always the best choice. Let's not make the same mistake twice.

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