

The Sunnis, the Insurgents, and the Elections

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Brief Analysis

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, no political event has been more important for Iraq than the December 15 elections for a permanent parliament. Although there were other important aspects to the elections, Sunni Arab participation will primarily mark them as a success or a failure to many observers inside and outside Iraq; Sunni participation will also set the stage for the next act of the Iraqi political drama and the subplot of the insurgency. Sunni Arab inclusion was achieved, and Sunni Arabs will be represented in the new government in numbers roughly proportional to their presence in the country; the insurgency will continue to evolve but not disappear. A more complex political and military situation is in the offing. With the Sunni Arabs now legitimate players in the political process, they will have a role in shaping the policy and actions of the Iraqi government and the coalition forces.

The Election Challenge

The election represented a fundamental challenge to both the Sunni Arab community and the insurgents. For the Sunni Arabs, it represented their last chance to positively affect the permanent government that would come into being. A boycott would have left the government firmly in the hands of the Shiites and their Kurdish allies, with the likely prospect of continued high levels of counterinsurgency activity in Sunni Arab areas and an increasing prospect of "occupation" by Shiite and Kurdish elements of the growing Iraqi security forces, including forces belonging to the feared Ministry of the Interior. The Sunni Arabs had learned in the wake of the January 2005 elections that the insurgency alone could not protect their interests in the rapidly evolving Iraq.

Political pressure compelled the insurgents to adapt, creating the beginnings of insurgent participation in the political process. The elections presented Sunni insurgents with a stark choice: embrace Sunni voting or lose influence in the Sunni Arab community. On the eve of the elections, the insurgents found themselves divided across a spectrum of attitudes. So-called nationalist insurgents, including at least some former regime elements, seemed most accepting of the elections, while organizations associated with the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were stridently opposed. Five groups associated with al-Zarqawi released a joint statement before the election denouncing the Iraqi elections as a "satanic project that violates God's law." Al-Qaeda in Iraq itself threatened a campaign of violence to disrupt the voting process. One insurgent associated website declared, "Iraqi Resistance organizations [make] clear that they consider any elections held under the guns of the occupation to be un-free,

illegal, and illegitimate." But others actively supported the voting by providing security at polling stations, as they had done during the October constitutional referendum, and actively encouraging Sunni Arabs to vote.

Both of the major Sunni Arab political groups contesting the elections, the Iraqi Accord and the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, presented positions closely aligned with the mainline resistance demand -- opposition to occupation. They also adopted other stances supporting positions advocated by insurgents, but neither group clearly carried the banner of the insurgents nor received their overt endorsement. Twenty or more parties associated with Sunni Arabs competed in the elections, so the two major groups do not represent the full range of platforms. It remains to be seen which if any of the Sunni parties will emerge as a recognizable voice of the insurgents, or at least a portion of them. It may well be that over time different Sunni Arab political parties will come to stand for different Iraqi elements of the insurgency.

Election Outcome

Sunni Arabs voted in significant numbers for the first time on December 15, and while results are incomplete, it appears that the two major Sunni Arab parties or blocs have won a substantial number of the seats in Sunni provinces. A Reuters exit poll suggested that in Anbar province the Iraqi Accord garnered the most votes, followed closely by Saleh al-Mutlak's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue. Al-Mutlak reportedly has strong connections to former regime elements, and the Accord is said to be associated with Sunni Islamist elements, although any such labels must be considered provisional. Adnan al-Dulaymi, a leader of the Accord, has already begun making noises about a coalition with Shiite parties.

Violence during the elections in Sunni Arab areas was limited. Overall security for the elections was tight, with border closings, curfews, vehicular traffic bans, and a massive security presence. Coalition and Iraqi security forces assumed a relatively low profile in Sunni Arab areas, while insurgents and local militias provided security at some polling stations. Although there were a few attacks on polling stations and workers, no major al-Qaeda or other terrorist offensive materialized, probably reflecting a combination of effective security measures and the potential Sunni Arab backlash. The Islamic Army in Iraq, a major insurgent organization, posted an internet statement on December 15 that it "expected Sunnis to vote to try to win back power from Iraq's now dominant Shiite parties." In contrast, there were reportedly as many as 300 insurgent incidents when Iraqis went to the polls in January, probably the highest single daily total since the insurgency began.

Implications of the Sunni Arab Vote

The insurgents are entering a new era in which politics -- working with the emerging political parties and leaders -- might be as important as armed resistance. Although some, primarily the terrorist element, will continue to engage only in violence, the mainstream of the insurgency will be unable to avoid the tug of the political current. They will most likely pursue a strategy combining talking with shooting. There will almost certainly be a closer relationship with overt political elements, even if this remains partially occluded. As the nationalists become increasingly involved in the political sphere, the extremists -- al-Qaeda types, some Iraqi jihadists, diehard Baathists -- should wane in influence. The political and social landscape will likely become more hostile for the extremists, and cases of terrorists being turned in to the security forces should increase. But the extremists will not disappear completely. They have sources of support within and without Iraq, and they will remain useful to the mainstream insurgents.

Sunni Arab political elements are likely to become increasingly assertive and troublesome. While there is a spectrum within the Sunni Arab bloc, they were elected on the basis of opposition to, not cooperation with, the coalition and government. They are likely to work hard in the upcoming negotiations to form a government, and over time Sunni politicians will act as a restraining force on the government and the coalition. They will also have to pay attention to the insurgents. There were some none-too-subtle warnings from insurgents prior to the elections, and

Sunni Arab politicians need the real and imagined power of the insurgency to underwrite their influence.

The new Iraqi government -- even, perhaps especially, if it is dominated by Shiite religious parties -- will face a situation of increased complexity. Trading Sunni Arab participation for a potential reduction in violence, it will face greater constraints in national policymaking. Increased tension within the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the government can be anticipated as the Sunni Arabs become more assertive against extrajudicial violence and Shiite and Kurdish domination of the ISF. A respected Sunni Arab leader as defense minister would create real tensions with the Ministry of the Interior if the latter remains under Shiite control.

For the coalition and its forces, the future holds a more constrained operational environment, one in which operations in Sunni Arab areas will be more difficult to sustain politically. Respected Sunni Arabs in the parliament, and likely the governing coalition, will be a strong voice against counterinsurgent operations that broadly affect the Sunni Arab community. Coalition forces presumably will face a more difficult relationship with the new Iraqi government. The first permanent government since Saddam is likely to feel that Iraq's destiny is in its hands, not those of the coalition, and to begin to act accordingly.

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