# Forward Progress

Dec 15, 2005

**Articles & Testimony**

For years, President Bush has prematurely heralded missions accomplished and corners turned in Iraq. But now it is Bush's critics who are peddling an implausibly rosy forecast: namely, that Iraqis are ready to stand on their own and could do a better job of stabilizing the country without an American presence. Meanwhile, the administration seems to have finally realized that there will be no single moment at which Iraq turns the corner, just a slow process that yields incremental steps toward stability and democracy. Today's election was one such step.

The election was quite an accomplishment, both because of the massive Sunni Arab vote and the competition among the Shia, at least some of whom seem prepared to penalize the United Iraqi Alliance for the weak performance of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and his government. It was that rarest of events in the Arab world: an election where no one knows who is going to win, and where all parties were reconciled to the necessity for a coalition government afterwards.

Bush has properly characterized the election as the next step in a long and difficult progression toward a better Iraq. Rather than offering euphoric claims that Sunni participation in voting shows that the insurgents are on the run, Bush conceded yesterday that "These enemies aren't going to give up because of a successful election." The even tougher reality is that many Sunnis support both voting and fighting as two different means to the same objective: greater power for their communities. While the President continues to set forth a grand vision—"a liberated Iraq could show the power of freedom to transform the Middle East," he said yesterday—he is comfortable with modest and incremental progress towards that long-term objective. The Bush administration now realizes that Iraq is going to remain a weak and fragile society for years and years.

This perspective—grand vision but modest and labored steps towards its realization—is quite a change from the administration's earlier approach. As we passed so many benchmark events—the July 2003 formation of the Governing Council, the November 2003 outline plan for transition, the December 2003 capture of Saddam, the January 2004 writing of the Transitional Administrative Law, the June 2004 handover from the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the January 2005 elections—the hope was always that from that moment on, the sailing would be much smoother. The administration assumed that the insurgents were pro-Saddam dead-enders who would soon give up the fight, at which point well-educated Iraqi technocrats could get the new government up and running. But these hopes for a turning point and then quick recovery were based on a false picture of Iraqi society. Iraq's problems go well beyond the insurgency. Saddam ruined the country's human infrastructure as much as he did its physical infrastructure: the technocrats were frightened and paralyzed, thugs had taken over society at most levels, and ordinary people had fallen back on elemental ethno-religious identity.

As a result, getting a functioning government in Iraq is going to be a slow and labored process. Just forming the new government will require complex negotiations to assemble the parliamentary two-thirds majority needed to elect the new presidential triumvirate. Those negotiations may well get caught up in the difficult struggle over how to amend the constitution during the first four months of the new parliament, as called for by a law passed just before the October referendum. When it gets up and functioning—which may not be until spring—the new government will be

the fourth Iraq has had since April 2003. Few ministries function more than minimally, especially in light of the destruction of government buildings after Saddam fell. Even if there were no security problems—what an if!—the government would be hard put to make the many difficult decisions needed: among them, ending the Saddam-era heavy state role in the economy.

Political reconstruction is as torturous a process as building the new Iraqi security services. Each is taking years, which will lead critics to wrongly claim no progress is being made. On both the political and security fronts, there is real progress; but only a foolhardy optimist would make the gamble that Iraq is ready to stand on its own yet. Iraq will need much help from the international community—both forces on the ground and an active commitment to reinforcing the political legitimacy of the new government.

To see how far Iraq has to go, consider how thin is the political class that competed in this election. Every one of the major parties is headed by an "exile," a label which includes those Kurds who for years did not live under Saddam's rule. While the pre-war State Department and intelligence community dismissed the exiles as lacking in popular support, it is the exiles who are winning the election with millions of votes. By contrast, the most important non-exile politician—Muqtada al-Sadr—has not been prepared to put his popularity to the voters' test, preferring to concentrate his energies on building up his militia.

To understand how modest are our expectations for Iraq, consider the country's success story: the Kurdish north, which is secure and prospering as never before. The blunt reality is that there is no real "Kurdistan Regional Government"; there is a KDP-istan and a PUK-istan run by Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. They are pro-American, rather respectful of human rights, tolerant of some criticism, less corrupt than most in Iraq, and relatively popular—but they are nonetheless tribal leaders exercising traditional control of their fiefdoms.

What we can realistically hope for in all of Iraq in the next few years is a replication of the Kurdish example: a society largely managed by traditional leaders who keep order in their areas, work hard to deliver good services so as to retain popular support, and cooperate with other such leaders to form a weak central government. We are on the path to that kind of victory in Iraq—an initially limited victory achieved after a long struggle. Bush may consider that the "complete victory" he promises; others may disagree. Some Americans may think the gain is not worth the effort. Fair enough. But let us not pretend that there are shortcuts to an even better outcome.

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