

Iraq's Sunnis Play the Election Card

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Brief Analysis

December 15 parliamentary elections will mark a major step in Iraq's political transformation, establishing the basis for the first permanent government since the fall of the Saddam regime and propelling the country deeper into the current critical "tipping period." A key, perhaps the key, aspect of the election will be the long-sought Sunni Arab participation in the political process. There is no doubt that the Sunni Arabs will participate in the upcoming election in significant numbers, unlike their boycott of the January 2005 elections. The Sunnis will participate, but for their own ends -- ends that are not necessarily favorable to the political outcome desired by the United States. The Sunnis now have a political card, in addition to a military card, to play.

Political Evolution

Iraq's Sunni Arabs have been evolving politically since the formation of the initial Governing Council on July 13, 2003. This evolution accelerated significantly with the January 2005 parliamentary elections. The Sunni boycott of that election left them significantly underrepresented in the transitional government and assisted in the political triumph of their Shiite, and, to a lesser extent, Kurdish enemies. While the boycott was a tactical success in the Sunni community, it weakened the ability of the Sunni community to pursue its goals overall. Sunnis began to rectify this situation with the October constitutional referendum, in which large numbers of Sunnis participated and nearly defeated the draft constitution. Sunni participation in the referendum indicated both the Sunni capacity for mobilization and the nature of their opposition to Iraq's political transformation. The fundamentally oppositional nature of their participation was also suggested by the involvement of Sunni delegates in the convention to draft the constitution; even while participating, they took hardline positions, bringing the process close to collapse. In the period since the constitutional referendum, overt Sunni political activity has accelerated again, with an array of Sunni parties, coalitions, and individuals competing aggressively for seats and, eventually, positions in the new government. Furthermore, even Sunni political elements that have previously participated in the political process, like the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), are taking positions highly critical of the United States and the interim Iraqi government.

Issues

The Sunnis are driven by a complex set of issues. These include the Sunni resistance to the U.S.-led occupation; the rise to power of the Shiite community; the perceived escalation of government and militia attacks on the Sunni

community; the quest to restore the political power of the Sunni community; and the trial of Saddam Hussein. Participation in the political process is seen as another means -- alongside armed resistance -- of handling these issues. Out of power and under attack, the Sunni community is mobilizing to protect and advance its interests using political tools created by its enemies. Saddam's public trial, and his emblematic performance in the televised sessions, serves to galvanize Sunnis depressed by defeat and the prospect of permanent inferior status in the new Shiite-dominated Iraq.

Parties and Players

As part of the Sunni political awakening, a raft of parties, coalitions and individuals have come forth as representatives of the Sunni community. These range from established organizations, such as the IIP, to new coalitions, such as the tribally based National Public Democratic Movement founded in Ramadi in November, to secular parties, such as the Assembly of Patriots. Both tribes and religious elements are participating actively in the Sunni campaign, whether as the basis for political organization themselves, or as get-out-the-vote engines. Participation by these traditional social associations within the Sunni community will act to ensure significant Sunni voting.

Beyond the Sunni overt political forces there are silent partners and deadly opponents of the elections. Some Sunni Iraqi insurgents, including Baathists, actively support the voting, reportedly promising to provide security at polling places, and informing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other terrorist elements that they oppose any effort to disrupt the elections. Essentially the same phenomenon was observed in the October referendum. For its part, Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq organization has openly declared that participating in the election is un-Islamic, on penalty of death. In a December 8 antielection pamphlet, Al Qaeda in Iraq stated, "Participation in the elections means that you are actively participating in dividing Muslims. Participation in the elections is akin to forcing the true Sunnis to follow the path of the crusaders." Ansar al-Sunna has taken the same position. However, there has been nothing like the sustained insurgent actions against the January 2005 election process, when opponents waged a fully fledged antielection campaign. Instead, the selective killing of candidates, Sunnis and others (especially Shiites) has occurred. The elections and expanded Sunni involvement in the resulting government will be another source of tension between the Iraqi nationalist and foreign terrorist elements of the insurgency.

Implications

The Sunnis do not represent a unified political or military opposition. Nevertheless, the current election process is forcing the Sunnis as a whole to determine their role in post-Saddam Iraq. So far their role has been largely negative, with the primary form of political expression being the insurgency. This has served Sunni interests, at least to some extent, in that it has made them a force to be reckoned with and not simply supplicants at the political table of the Shiite sheikhs. The Sunni political posture began to change with the October referendum; Sunni Arab politicians in the new parliament will likely constitute a substantial bloc of seats. As such they will be able to exercise more political leverage. Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite, and the Kurds will be looking for partners. Allawi already enjoys a measure of support among tribal and secular Sunnis, at least in part because of his role in the former Baathist Party, and the popular perception of him as a "strong man." Sunni Arabs do not view the Kurds, also Sunnis by and large, with the same fear and loathing as they view the Shiites. Depending on how the voting turns out, Sunni Arabs could have substantial political influence in the new parliament and government. The new parliament will not only look different, it will act differently.

The insurgency will also look different. Sunni political elements running for office have adopted positions close to those of the nationalist insurgency. With Sunnis represented in substantial numbers in the government, the insurgents will have both a political and an armed face. Nationalist insurgents will be forced to deal with the elected Sunni Arab politicians. Some insurgents are supporting the elections, but they have already let it be known that they

will carefully monitor the performance of elected Sunni representatives. One insurgent reportedly stated, "We are telling Sunnis that they have to vote for nationalist parties and even if they win we will be watching very closely to keep them in line." This conjures up the notion that the insurgents will continue the struggle from within the political system, perhaps along the lines of the so-called "Nazi path to power" using the political system to destroy it from within. The Sunni bloc in the government will also likely function as a restraint on government counterinsurgency actions and as a critic of the extralegal actions of the security forces. For example, Sunni leaders have been protesting the mistreatment of Sunnis at the hands of the Shiite-dominated Ministry of Interior and security forces. Hussein Shukur Falluji, a Sunni member of the constitutional committee, noted, "What is very strange is that the Iraqi government has not investigated the increasing violence against Sunni Arabs. We believe that elements from the government's security forces are involved in this, cooperating with the killers." As the election draws Sunnis into the political process, it will also draw insurgents into the government.

This process will probably have some unintended, or at least unanticipated, consequences. These are likely to be mixed in terms of their positive and negative effects on U.S. objectives in Iraq. As with so much of recent Iraqi history, the outcome will be neither all good nor all bad. Until the results become evident, and the dynamics of the new government become clear, restraint on issuing magisterial judgments regarding the elections is probably in order.

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