

# The Elections and the Insurgency

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### Brief Analysis

Iraq's elections will mean many things to many people over time. Nevertheless important results of the historic elections are already clear, or mostly so. The fact that Iraqis in general went to the polls in large numbers is encouraging. But paradoxically the elections may also boost the insurgency's claim to leadership of the Sunni Arab community.

### The Insurgency and Security Operations

Despite the blood-curdling rhetoric of the terrorist element of the resistance and the enormous play this was given in the press, the insurgents never had the capacity to do more than limited and local damage to the election process in Kurdish and Shiite areas. There was no chance that the insurgents could prevent the elections from progressing on the whole.

Security operations and procedures by coalition and Iraqi forces appear to have worked quite well. Intensified operations in Baghdad, Mosul, south of Baghdad (the so-called "triangle of death"), and other areas maintained pressure on the insurgents from the close of the battle of Falluja until the day of the elections. Iraqi security forces deployed for the elections in a highly visible way, with Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles appearing in the streets. Although not tested seriously, they seem to have performed well in the point security missions they were given, and probably in preempting insurgent actions through arrest and detention. Altogether this was an impressive show of force.

Incidents on election day were not radically different in number or type from the normal business of the insurgency. This was probably due to the stringent security measures imposed to protect the voting process, both before and on the day of the elections, and to a decision by the insurgents not to expend key resources against fully prepared and alerted Iraqi and coalition forces. Plenty of people are drawn in one way or another to suicide missions in Iraq, and the loss of these people represents no real setback to the insurgents. Far more debilitating to the insurgents were undoubtedly the killing and arresting of leadership cadre during intensified security operations in the weeks preceding the election. This effort probably substantially suppressed resistance operations.

### The Turnout

As expected, Kurds and Shiites voted in large numbers, firmly establishing the political groups that represent them

as the building blocks of the new government. Technical or process problems do not appear to have been very significant, although they undoubtedly affected voting in some localities. Complaints can be expected to reverberate for some time. Only in areas where irregularities worked against specific groups, perhaps Kirkuk and Mosul, will these become serious issues.

From December 2004 on, insurgent elements operating in Sunni areas conducted a campaign to intimidate voters and disrupt the election process. This campaign, part of a broader insurgent political and military strategy aimed at establishing dominance in Sunni areas, increasingly focused on the election process as January 30 approached. It appears to have culminated in the days immediately before the elections.

While the battle of Falluja in November 2004 was fought on very unequal grounds, the coalition having clear-cut military superiority, and was never in doubt, the December through January "Battle of the Elections" was fought on more equal grounds, with the insurgents enjoying substantial advantages: an embedded infrastructure, cloaking provided by local communities, an established campaign of intimidation, and political and religious advocacy of an election boycott. The combination of effective intimidation and support for the boycott were likely the primary factors suppressing the Sunni turnout.

The elections were a referendum, at least in Sunni Arab areas, on the insurgency; not necessarily on whether or not individuals supported it, but indicating to what extent the insurgency exercised influence or created fear. From initial reports it seems that the insurgents may have lost the referendum in some areas and won it in others. Preliminary reporting suggests that voting by Sunnis was quite limited, but more detailed reports in coming days will provide a clearer picture. It will be important to analyze these results to see what patterns emerge. For instance: did the Sunni vote concentrate in a few cities with a strong coalition presence such as Tikrit or Baghdad, or was it more evenly distributed across the Sunni heartland; and did low Sunni turnouts correlate to known insurgent strongholds? In some areas with mixed Sunni/Shiite populations, such as certain neighborhoods in Baghdad and Baqubah, it will be more difficult to determine to what extent Sunnis voted.

If, as first indications suggest, there was a low Sunni Arab vote, that would further separate the Sunni population from the transforming political process in Iraq. The progression of the Sunni-based insurgency has already moved the situation in this direction, as the Iraqi government and the coalition have found themselves increasingly fighting Sunnis in Sunni areas. And it does not really matter whether or not a decision to not vote was based on fear of the insurgency or support for it.

#### Winners from the Election

The election appears to have resulted in multiple winners. Of course the Kurds and Shiites have won a historic place in the new state. Especially for the Shiites this represents the dawn of a new day with enormous potential. What they will do once in power remains to be seen, but they have a historic opportunity. But at the same time the insurgents could also have won, if the Sunni turnout is as low as some reports suggest. The hold of the insurgents over the Sunni population will have been demonstrated, and separation of the Sunnis from the new political process reinforced.

The loser here is clearly the broader Sunni population; the elections ratify the fall from power not just of the Saddam regime but of Sunni Iraq. Sunni Arabs will apparently be only weakly represented in the new institutions, even if the victorious Kurds and Shiites prove magnanimous, and clearheaded, in victory. The other "political space" fostered by the insurgents will represent the alternative for the Sunnis: the space of those who resist occupation and collaboration.

While an important step in the political transformation of Iraq, the elections do not represent any sort of definitive endpoint. The sorting out of the election results, the formation of new institutions, the writing of a new constitution, all are yet to be accomplished, and will probably not proceed smoothly.

The insurgency itself will continue, and perhaps intensify, becoming increasingly a war pitting the Sunni Arabs against the government and the coalition. The insurgents themselves will likely see their campaign to disrupt the elections in Sunni areas as successful and validating their struggle. They will push their strategic lines of operation still harder. For coalition and Iraqi government forces it will be difficult to sustain the tempo of operations that has been maintained since the battle of Falluja. Problems in standing up the new government could lead to a loss of momentum in counterinsurgent operations. The insurgents will use any respite to gather strength and strike back. While there was much positive in the election outcome, these elements represent a darker side of what has happened, and are a shadow on the future of the state.

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