

WHERE NOW FOR A DEMOCRATIC IRAQ?

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On Sunday, Iraq went to the polls, or at least a sizeable majority of Iraqis did - those that were not intimidated by the continuing violence or had been persuaded by some religious and political leaders to abstain. They voted for a national assembly and for local governments in the country's 18 provinces; Kurds, additionally, elected their own regional parliament. Early indications of results and voter turnout did not offer any surprises. Predictions of a strong showing by a list endorsed by Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and of a significantly lower turnout among the country's Sunni population have yet to be proven wrong.

So were the elections a complete and utter failure in bringing Iraq closer to a democratic society and indicative of what many critics of the situation in Iraq and its handling by the US, and its allies, see as a major disaster in an anyway volatile region? Hardly.

But neither has Sunday's poll put Iraq on a road to democracy as it has been heralded, not least by policy makers in Washington and London, keen to portray the elections as yet another example of the success of their strategy of bringing democracy to the entire region. No-one should be surprised by this division of opinion.

From the fall of Baghdad, to the end of major hostilities, to the handing over of power to Iraq's interim government, to the recapturing of Fallujah, the past almost two years have been littered with such "breakthroughs".

The fact that hopes were raised too high on every occasion, that predictions of impending peace, security, prosperity and democracy had to be revised shortly afterwards, and that, eventually, the exit point for coalition troops is no longer the establishment of democracy, but merely Iraqi security forces who can fend for themselves, has given those opposed to the war and US policy ammunition to expose spectacular policy failures, and arrogance and hypocrisy in Washington and the capitals of its allies.

Yet, this war of words pales against the very real and bloody war that still rages in Iraq, a war that will not end now that around 60-70 per cent of Iraqis have cast their vote, and that has cost the lives of many coalition soldiers, members of Iraq's security forces and above all civilians.

So the question is not who is right about what is going on in Iraq, but rather, what can be done about it?

To answer it, those opposed to a foreign troop presence must realise that there are no quick fixes for the current problems, and certainly that withdrawing all coalition forces is no solution at this point in time; while the US and its allies have to recognise the sheer complexity of the problems they face and that beefing up Iraq's security forces is but one necessary step among a much needed comprehensive strategy. Elections have been a necessary element in this strategy.

Despite their flaws, they provide at least some kind of legitimate representation of ordinary Iraqis, who, by turning out in high numbers, have underscored their desire for democracy.

The government that will emerge in March, probably only after protracted bargaining, will be more legitimate than the US-appointed interim government that was in charge of some of Iraq's day-to-day business.

More importantly, however, for the future of Iraq and the relations between its three main communities will be the outcome of the process of drafting a new constitution, a task with which the new assembly elected on Sunday is now charged.

Yet those elected to represent ordinary Iraqis have to reach out to those who have chosen, or been forced, to abstain from the polls.

The drafters of the new constitution must include representatives from all of Iraq's communities - Shia, Sunnis, Kurds, as well as many other religious and ethnic groupings. As the new constitution will have to be approved in a referendum, some safeguards exist to ensure that the final document will be a fair compromise between the different, and often conflicting interests in a country that some still see in danger of sliding into civil war.

Only once this constitution is in place, hopefully by the end of 2005, can there be another round of elections for an Iraqi government and parliament.

If accompanied by improvements in security and economic recovery, to name just two of the tasks that the new government - and its successor - will face, Iraq might in the end indeed be better off than it would have been without the war.

This cannot and should not be used as retrospective justification for either the invasion or any of the mistakes made in its course.

But the mere existence of such a prospect should be embraced by all who care about the future.

In the face of the courage of ordinary Iraqis who defied the terrorists who had threatened to "wash the streets in voters' blood", the continuing debate over the legitimacy of coalition forces in Iraq displays a selfcentred arrogance that is neither necessary nor helpful.

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