

Iraq's election kingmakers

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'Catastrophism' rules much thought about Iraq, including that of the Bush administration's critics, and politicians throughout the Islamic world, especially in Sunni Arab regions. It is the conventional attitude among Canadians. But Iraq's future should not be written off prematurely. Judgment on its politics should not be a simple function of one's view of the U.S. government.

Iraq is not in the midst of a war of national liberation against U.S. imperialism, but a civil war -- between the democratically elected government and Baathist and *jihadi* forces drawn from the formerly dominant Sunni Arab minority.

Western democracies have three grim options: to call on the U.S.-led forces that support Iraq's government to withdraw, as the Baathists and *jihadis* want; to encourage a stalemated bloodbath among the contending parties in the hope that compromise will follow; or to support Iraq's government in winning this war as fairly as possible, with respect for all of the rights promoted in the new constitution.

Of these options, the third remains by far the most principled, and the most feasible. President George W. Bush is unlikely to exit Iraq; nor are any of his likely successors. An unprincipled disengagement would have catastrophic consequences, and seriously undermine U.S. power and prestige. The second option would be the most cynical, the most difficult to manage, and the least likely to produce a long-term positive outcome.

Tomorrow, Iraq's voters will elect a Council of Representatives. This election will briefly eclipse the reporting of terrorist violence and apparently state-sanctioned torture. There will be a high turnout, and there may well be cries of foul from all sides, particularly in disputed Kirkuk, the predominantly Kurdish city in the centre of Iraq's oil-producing region. The good news is, the new council will be representative of Iraq's voters. The proportional list system ensures that. At least one-quarter of the new deputies will be women.

Equally positive, no list will win an absolute majority (barring large-scale fraud), so the result will either be a coalition or a minority government.

Expect the Shia Arab-dominated United Iraqi Alliance, and small related breakaway factions, to win more than 40 per cent of the seats. Expect the Kurdistan Alliance to win about 20 per cent. The lists of long-term rivals, former prime minister Iyad Allawi and current deputy prime minister Ahmed Chalabi, secular Shia Arab leaders, will win about 15 per cent between them. The smaller lists will share about 5 per cent; and Sunni Arab lists will divide up most of the remaining seats (as much as 20 per cent). The primary resulting cleavage is likely to be between the pro- and anti-constitution parties. The most likely government is a coalition of the United Iraqi Alliance and Kurdistan Alliance. These two may offer to include Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Allawi's secular Shiites, and a small number of Sunni Arab politicians willing to work the new order.

A secular coalition led by the Kurdistan Alliance is possible, but the numbers required to make that

plausible are probably not there. Thus, divisions among Sunni Arabs, and between them and the Shiites, will ensure that the Kurdistan Alliance will be kingmakers. That means the new constitution will go forward and the new government will be made up of pro-constitution parties.

Conventional wisdom considers the constitution validated this past October as inadequate. That's wrong: Iraq can only hold together as a loose pluralist federation, in which its major communities enjoy self-government and some limited shared government. A centralized Iraq would encourage Shia Arabs to try to govern all of Iraq in their image, not just the south. It would be repugnant to Kurdistan after more than a decade of autonomy.

By contrast, a pluralist and decentralized federation, ending any chance of a Baathist restoration, is exactly what the new constitution envisages, including the opportunity for Sunni Arabs to form their own self-governing region where they can police themselves, and benefit from revenues from federally administered oil fields in current production.

To succeed, the new government must implement the new constitution, and build sufficient compliance for it among Sunni Arabs for them to determine that support for the insurgency is against their long-term interests.

Aside from forming a government, the council has work to do on key elements of the constitution. Two-thirds have to agree a law governing the composition and procedures of the new Supreme Court. This qualified majority provision ensures that the Supreme Court cannot become the instrument of the Shia Arab majority -- it offers important assurances to all of Iraq's minorities.

The same high threshold will be required to create a senate, which offers another opportunity for building coalitions with the major and smaller minorities. The council must also proceed to establish regions, first in Baghdad and the south, to match that in Kurdistan, and, by the terms of the constitution, it must give the same opportunity to representatives from the predominantly Sunni Arab governorates. Kurdistan will have the chance to unify with Kirkuk by December of 2007.

All this will test Iraq's new political class. But the alternatives are worse. Supporting Sunni Arab nostalgia for a centralized Iraq, in which they were the top dogs, is a recipe for persistent conflict. Decentralization has the possibility of removing the heat from both security and distributive questions, without the even bloodier formation of three weak independent states.

Shia Arab leaders have indicated they will settle for having their region (or two) in the south and being dominant in Baghdad; Kurdistan will live with an Iraqi federation that respects its distinctiveness, allows it to provide its own security, and enables the unification of its people. Between them, they have the resources and skills to rebuild an Iraq that has an equal, if no longer privileged, place for Sunni Arabs.

It will be better if they do so through political rather than coercive means, but coercion is necessary to deal with the hard-line Baathists and *jihadis*. At the same time, inducements toward Sunni Arab moderation should be offered -- one of which is knowledge that the U.S.-led forces are committed to staying the course, and to respecting Iraq's new constitution.

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