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IRAQ AFTER THE ELECTIONS

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The elections for a provisional parliament held in Iraq on January 30 have been described as a revolutionary event that will change the face of Iraq, and perhaps of the entire Middle East. But despite the success inherent in the very fact that an election took place, the judgment that it heralds a revolutionary transformation is, at best, premature. After all, this “free” election actually took place under the watchful eyes of no less than 300,000 foreign and Iraqi security forces. And the historical experience of Iraq under British control in the last century is that when western guidance and oversight were withdrawn, democratic structures quickly collapsed.

The major significance of the election is its moral symbolism. For the Americans and their coalition partners, it justifies the war effort and prepares the groundwork for their departure from Iraq. For Iraqis, it is intended to confer legitimacy on the real revolution that took place following the phase of major combat in March-April 2003, which eliminated the anomaly of Sunni minority rule over a Shi'ite majority and a Kurdish minority almost equal in size to the Sunni one.

The true tests of long-term democratic development in Iraq will be faced at three main

junctures: when a real division of power is implemented; after the coalition forces leave the country; and when (or if) the first new government is replaced by elections rather than by a military coup or hereditary succession, as is the case today in many Arab republics. The first test will take place during the coming year and will include three phases:

- a) the appointment by Parliament of a Presidential Council which will, in turn, appoint a government;
- b) the enactment of a constitution subject to a referendum to be held in October;
- c) the election of a regular Parliament in December.

Success even in the first test means surmounting serious obstacles. Since the end of major combat in April 2003, Iraq has been the arena of overt and more covert struggles over the identity, character and direction of the state, alongside more mundane struggles for power. The Kurds, for example, have threatened to secede if the new parliament and constitution do not enshrine the main Kurdish demands: a federal system of government; a secular regime; and the inclusion of Kirkuk in the Kurdish region of the federation.

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These demands have provoked fierce resistance not only among Sunnis but also among many Shi'ites, including those who had previously endorsed them. As for the Shi'ites, it is difficult to find many common denominators among them apart from their general endorsement of the electoral process. They are divided on questions of future leadership, the political orientation of the state, and the content of the new democracy. For example, there are clashes between inside and outside leaders, between pro-Iranian and pro-Arab leaders, and, above all, between secularists and those who see the elections and the entire process of democratization as nothing more than a means to produce Shi'ite domination in a theocratic state. Finally, the low rate of voter participation among Sunnis may push them further to the margins of politics and prompt them to adopt even more radical measures in order to undermine the whole idea of democracy. These contradictory approaches will undoubtedly be reflected in the division of power in the new provisional government and even more so in the process of drafting the new constitution. The first provisional constitution proposed in the spring of 2004 provoked serious divisions for several reasons: the federal structure of government, the failure to specify Islam as the main source of legislation, and the authority given to the three provinces (i.e., to the Kurds) to veto government decisions. Opposition to these provisions created fertile ground for intensified resistance in the so-called "Sunni triangle" and for the outbreak of violence among Shi'ites led by Moqtada al-Sadr. Although it is difficult to know if the next round of constitutional discussions will produce similar reactions, there is some reason to expect that as long as the Americans are still present in Iraq and guiding the process of democratization, points of compromise can be found. The real imponderable is what will happen the day after

they leave.

Of the other challenges to democratization, the most visible is that of various Iraqi and non-Iraqi terrorists bent on sabotaging any effort to institutionalize the new order. But perhaps no less significant is the threat of tribal and Islamist elements in every sector and camp in Iraq, whose own values – remote from those of western democracy – undermine the social infrastructure meant to serve as the foundation of a democratic polity. Finally, most of the neighboring states are profoundly ambivalent about, if not hostile to, a successful democratic experiment in Iraq, either because they are concerned about the demonstration effect on their own citizens or because they fear the emergence of a Shi'ite dominated neighbor and/or a quasi-autonomous or independent Kurdistan. Turkey, for example, has intervened in a variety of ways in an effort to forestall the idea of federal government in Iraq. Iraq is now oscillating between two poles, both of which find precedent in the modern history of Lebanon. The first pole is the Lebanese model of power-sharing according to a religious/confessional key that permits more-or-less democratic elections and replacement of governments. The second pole is the Lebanese model of protracted and exhausting civil war. There is no basis for predicting which model will ultimately prevail in Iraq, but there is no doubt that the process of stabilization will take a long time, with or without the presence of coalition forces. However, one thing is clear: the revolutionary change that resulted from the war, i.e., the shift in the internal balance of power in favor of the Shi'ites and Kurds, is irreversible. As a result, the new regime that emerges, even if after a prolonged struggle, will be more representative of the Iraqi population than was the Ba'th regime or any of those that preceded it.

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