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## Iraq: As Good as it Gets

Gary Anderson

I was not surprised that Ayad Allawi got a lot of votes in the recent Iraqi election. What surprised me is how many of his votes got counted. Allawi is a secular Shiia who ran on a nationalist platform. He ran squarely against the ultra religious segment of the Shiia elites in Iraq who have cuddled up to Iran in recent years, and he also opposed the radical Islamic nationalists in Iraq's fractious Shiite majority. In this, he gained the overwhelming support of the nation's minority Sunni community. Of nearly 200 Iraqis I polled in the months leading up to the election, virtually no-one I talked to said that he or she would vote for the ruling Maliki block. I wasn't asking who they would vote for, only if they would vote. However, about thirty percent of those interviewed volunteered their preference anyway. With one exception, Shiia and Sunni, they were for Allawi's team. The lone Maliki leaning exception was the Deputy Governor of the Abu Ghraib district (Qada'a), and he was running on Maliki's ticket.

Despite their enthusiasm for Allawi, most of my Iraqi acquaintances did not believe that their votes would count. They believed that Maliki and Ahmed Chalabi had conspired with the Iranians to rig the election. Jamail, my farmer buddy, was the contrarian in the group. He declared confidently; "this government is so incompetent that they couldn't rig a goat auction much less an election." At the time I thought him to be a cynic. I now think he was a prophet. The election results surprised both the American leadership and the Iraqi elites who reside primarily in the protected luxury of Green Zone. They talk to each other and not to the farmer Jamails. The fact that the residents of the Green Zone call it the "International Zone", while everyone else in Iraq still calls it the Green Zone is telling.

Some of the Green Zone dwellers think the post-election jockeying between the various political factions will be American style "horse trading" as we saw in the health care debate; they have sold this line to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. This is bunk. Iraqi politics is a full contact sport, and blood will be shed. Nor will the battle be primarily sectarian. It will be a Shiia-on-Shiia affair. If it doesn't end up in a civil war, it will look like a Chicago gang war before it is over.

The primary protagonists will be Iranian leaning Shiia elites, Shiia secular nationalists, and the Islamic nationalists led by Muqtada Sadr. If the nationalistic Iraqi Army has to get involved, it will tilt toward the secular nationalists because they despise Sadr and his Jesh al Mahdi (JAM) militia. Maliki will likely lean toward whatever side the Army favors to keep his bargaining position. There is a very good chance that the Iranian faction will lose, and Ahmed Chalabi will likely end up in Iran where he is much more popular than he is in Iraq.

Americans like to try to mirror image other nations and draw analogies to our experience. If there is any kind of analogy to American history that will be drawn to the next year in Iraq, it is to the America of the 1850s. The Shiite majority is going through what America's White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) majority was going through in the years leading up to the Civil War. In America, the argument was over whether America would be an agrarian society with a weak central government or an industrial society with a strong federal system. Slavery was an incendiary issue, but not the central one.

Iraq's Shiia will struggle with whether they see their nation as a secular modern society with a strong centralized leadership leaning toward the west, or a fragmented Islamic base with Iran as a model. The Sunnis will side with the Shiia secular nationalists. The Kurds will likely sit on the fence initially and look to their best interests.

We did not end the power struggle between the competing WASP philosophies in the United States without a civil war that was bloodier than the world had yet seen. The Iraqi solution, although it will likely be somewhat violent, will probably not be an Armageddon. The Iraqis have a way of keeping confrontation manageable that we Americans lacked in our formative years.

What should we do? My advice is to let them sort it out. If I am right, the Iraqi Army and secular nationalists will come out on top. The result will probably be a more authoritarian Iraq than we would like; but it is likely to become a nation that is western in orientation and pragmatic with democratic trappings. If the Iranians overtly intervene, we should act to negate them. That is in our own naked self interest, but my bet is that they will refrain from overt interference; they have enough problems internally. Our most positive contribution would be to keep the Kurds in the tent shouting out.

When we started this war, we had a negative outcome in mind. We wanted an Iraq without Saddam and without Weapons of Mass Destruction. When the aftermath of the March election sorts itself out, that will be the likely bottom line end state. That may be as good as it gets.

*Gary Anderson recently left the State Department after a one year tour as a Senior Governance Advisor with an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in the Abu Ghraib District (Qada'a) of Iraq's Baghdad Province.*

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