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Shaheen Mozaffar

Bridgewater State College, smozaffar@bridgew.edu

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# Elections, Violence and Democracy in Iraq

Shaheen Mozaffar



In 2005, Iraq held three successful national elections that were largely free and credible by accepted international standards. On January 30, 58% of registered voters went to the polls to elect the Transitional National Assembly (TNA), which wrote the new Constitution. On October 15, 63% of registered voters turned out for the constitutional referendum to approve the new Constitution by an overwhelming margin of 79% to 21%. And on December 15, 76% of registered voters cast ballots to elect the 275-seat Council of Representatives (COR), Iraq's national legislature.<sup>1</sup>

Holding three elections in one year is a daunting task even for established democracies, but it is an extraordinary feat for a country that is trying to establish a new democracy after three decades of tyranny while being wracked by terrorist bombings and violent insurgency. The overall incidence and intensity of terrorist and insurgent attacks declined progressively on each Election Day, but the terrorists and insurgents posed an ever-present threat, intimidating, kidnapping and occasionally killing political candidates, voters, poll workers and election officials in the lead up to all three elections. The elections were important components of a larger political process designed to establish the institutional and political foundations for democracy in Iraq in the aftermath of the American-led invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein in March 2003. The COR elections represented the final step in the formation of a democratic government. But as Iraqi leaders wrangled unsuccessfully over the choice of a new Prime Minister and the composition of the new government two months after the COR elections, a terrorist bomb ripped

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<sup>1</sup>In addition, approximately 300,000 Iraqi citizens living in 18 countries across the world voted in January and December, but not in October due to logistical constraints. Also, approximately 200,000 eligible voters incarcerated in prisons and detention centers (under both Iraqi and US control, including the infamous Abu Ghraib prison), residing as patients in hospitals, and serving in the Iraqi police force and the military voted in special one-day elections held prior to the regularly scheduled elections in October and December. It is not known whether Saddam Hussein, who was being held in a US detention center and was an eligible voter, chose to exercise his franchise. For reasons of space, this article does not deal with these elections.

through one of Iraq's holiest Shiite mosques in Samarra on February 22, 2006, unleashing a paroxysm of retaliatory sectarian attacks and pushing the country to the brink of an all-out civil war.

Iraq thus confronts a central challenge today: will its political future be determined by the three resoundingly successful elections held in 2005, or by the brutality and violence of terrorism, insurgency and sectarian conflict? This article answers this question through a systematic analysis and pragmatic assessment of the relationship between elections and violence and its impact on the prospects for democracy in Iraq.

## THE THREE ELECTIONS

Given the precarious security conditions caused by militant insurgency and terrorist bombings, the three Iraqi elections in 2005 were a resounding success. One factor contributing to this success was a rare manifestation of sound political judgment by the US when it relented on its initial refusal to allow a substantial role for the UN in Iraq and agreed to an exclusive UN role in assisting the newly-established Independent Election Commission of Iraq (IECI) in the organization and management of the three elections.



This change in US policy, however, was due largely to the steadfast opposition of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most revered Shiite religious leader and an astute political strategist, to any US involvement in the elections because it would diminish the legitimacy of the elections in the eyes of the Iraqis and the international community, and to his uncompromising insistence on an exclusive UN role in overseeing the elections.

The IECI, whose seven members and the Chief Electoral Officer were selected by the United Nations (UN), received the full range of organizational, technical and logistical assistance that is now commonplace in democracy promotion strategies from an International

Elections Assistance Team operating under the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq and funded from a general UN fund facility with contributions from 25 countries, including the United States. This assistance enabled the IECI to organize the three elections professionally and execute them competently according to accepted international standards.

Amidst escalating terrorist and insurgent attacks, the IECI conducted a successful voter registration exercise in November 2004, registering 14.3 million voters, which represented a substantial percentage of eligible voters in an estimated population of 28 million people, almost half of whom are minors. It conducted another registration exercise in August 2005 to update the voter list, increasing the number of registered voters since January to 15.5 million. In response to the poor security situation in the dangerous western governorate of Anbar (the heart of Sunni insurgency and the scene of high US casualties), the IECI extended this registration period by one week, resulting in an 18% increase since January in the registration of Sunni voters.

These high registration figures translated into increasingly higher voter turnout from 58% to 63% to 76% through the three elections (Table 1). Voter turnout increased even more sharply in the Sunni majority governorates of Anbar and Salahaddin (where Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit is located), in Diyala and Ninewa, both with heavily mixed populations but with a Sunni majority, and in Baghdad with a heavily mixed population but with a Shiite majority. Anbar witnessed a dramatic increase from 2% in January to 38% in October and 86% in December, with corresponding figures of 29%, 90%, and 98% for Salahaddin, 33%, 67%, and 75% for Diyala, 17%, 54%, and 70% for Ninewa, and 51%, 55% and 70% in Baghdad.

**Table 1**  
Voter turnout percentages in three Iraqi elections in 2005

Governorates	January	October	December
Anbar	2.42	38.35	86.37
Babil	73.06	72.74	79.43
Baghdad	51.49	54.97	70.06
Basrah	72.36	63.01	74.20
Diyala	33.09	67.41	74.87
Dohuk	92.46	84.81	92.00
Erbil	83.79	95.46	95.26
Karbala	74.75	60.19	70.44
Misan	61.25	57.59	73.27
Muthanna	64.79	58.80	66.07
Najaf	75.25	56.51	72.76
Ninewa	16.96	53.50	70.16
Qadissiya	70.73	56.71	64.67
Salahaddin	29.25	90.36	98.43
Suleimaniya	82.11	75.25	84.19
Taamim	70.01	78.47	86.10
Theqar	68.84	56.62	71.85
Wasit	71.08	53.72	67.99
<b>IRAQ</b>	<b>58.32</b>	<b>63.28</b>	<b>76.36</b>

These high registration and turnout figures testify to the strong and widespread support for democracy expressed by all Iraqis in several public opinion polls.

In one poll, for instance, 91% of respondents favored democracy over authoritarian rule, and 85% favored democracy despite its manifest limitations.<sup>2</sup> These figures also testify to the success of IECI's new nationwide security provisions and its special provisions in Anbar to help increase Sunni participation in October and December. These provisions included: a three-ring security perimeter around polling stations manned by all-Iraqi security forces, backed with unobtrusive US military support, for three days before and after Election Day; coordination with local leaders, and even with some Sunni insurgents (via mediation by Sunni politicians) for additional security on Election Day; increased recruitment of Sunni poll workers; and IECI rulings that permitted voters classified as "internally displaced persons" (due to political violence) to vote in designated polling stations, and voters who could not reach their assigned polling stations due to security threats to vote in the nearest safe polling stations.

Finally, the high figures testify to the refusal by the majority of ordinary Sunnis to repeat their strategic mistake in heeding their leaders' misguided call to boycott the January TNA elections, which excluded the Sunnis from the constitution-writing process. Sunni voters thus turned out in huge numbers in October to reject the new Constitution with a 97% "No" vote in Anbar and an 82% "No" vote in Salahaddin. In Diyala, the Constitution barely passed with a 51% "Yes" vote. In Ninewa, only the combined high turnout among the Kurds, Shiites, Christians, Turkomans and other Arab minority groups helped to offset the high Sunni turnout and produce a 55% "No" vote against the Constitution, well-short of the two-thirds "No" vote in three governorates required for the rejection of the Constitution and a new referendum. Sunni voters turned out in even higher numbers in December to elect three Sunni parties—the Iraqi Accordance Front, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, and the Iraqi Nation List—to the COR with a combined total of 56 seats, compared to none in the TNA (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
Results of the COR Elections in Iraq, December 15, 2005

Political Parties	Seat Totals	Seat %
Unified Iraqi Alliance	128	46.55
Kurdistani Gathering	53	19.27
Iraqi Accordance Front	44	16.00
National Iraqi List	25	9.09
Iraqi Front for National Dialogue	11	4.00
Islamic Union of Kurdistan	5	1.82
Liberation and Reconciliation Gathering	3	1.09
Progressives	2	.73
Iraqi National List	1	.36
Iraqi Turkoman Front	1	.36
Al Ezediah Movement for Progressing and Reform	1	.36
Al Rafedeen List	1	.36
<b>Totals</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>100.00</b>

2. Mark Tessler, Mansoor Moaddel, and Ronald Inglehart, "What do Iraqis Want?" *Journal of Democracy* 17:1 (January 2006), pp. 38-50

The results in Table 2 approximate the broad sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraq, but these results also obscure politically salient intra-sectarian and intra-ethnic, as well as ideological, differences within the major parties in the COR, all of which are actually coalitions of groups representing these differences. The Kurdistan Gathering, for instance, consists of two traditionally antagonistic Kurdish parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party—and includes a moderate religious party. But the Kurds are also represented by the fundamentalist Islamic Union of Kurdistan, with 5 COR seats. The three Sunni parties include nationalists, Islamists and secularists. The Iraqi Accordance Front with a broader support base includes the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue includes a small Christian Party and two small Turkoman parties, and the Iraqi National List supports crackdown of Baathists and Sunni Islamic insurgents. The Iraqi National List headed by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi is a secular nationalist coalition of Sunnis and Shiites. It is the only party to win votes in every governorate, indicating the existence of a nationwide secular base that could be mobilized to counter the growing influence of Islamists.

The most important of these intra-group differences, however, exists within the United Iraq Alliance (UIA), the Islamist-leaning Shiite political bloc that controls 128 COR seats. The UIA, which consists of 16 mostly small parties, is spearheaded by three major parties which together control 82 seats, but which also have deep political differences. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) with 25 seats is heavily Islamist and is widely viewed to possess close political ties with Iran, where it was founded by Iraqi Shiite exiles in 1982. The al-Dawah Party (DP) with 25 seats includes a secular and a religious faction, and is headed by former interim Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The al-Sadrites with 32 seats is headed by the populist and fiercely anti-American cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr.

Moqtada al-Sadr's populism threatens the political leadership of the Shiite religious establishment in Najaf and of its spiritual head, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. His militia, the Mahdi Army, which has often clashed with SCIRI's militia, the Badr Brigade, is now in virtually total control of Sadr City, the slum neighborhood of Baghdad from where Moqtada draws his political support.<sup>3</sup> His supporters ran as independents in the

3. Sadr City is named after Moqtada's father, who was a grand ayatollah, and, along with his brothers, was killed by agents of Saddam Hussein. Moqtada aspires to inherit his father's leadership mantle but cannot do so because he has never completed the rigorous religious education and training Shiite tradition requires before a person acquires the title of ayatollah.

January elections, but because he has a large following among the Shiite poor classes, he was reluctantly invited to join UIA for the December elections to ensure a Shiite legislative majority after the Sunnis agreed to participate in the COR elections. As the largest party in the COR, the UIA has the constitutional authority to nominate a candidate for Prime Minister for final approval by the COR. In the ensuing fight for the nomination, the al-Sadrites' control of 32 COR seats was indispensable in al-Jaafari's unexpected victory by one vote over Adel Abdel-Mahdi of SCIRI, who was supported by other UIA, as well as by Kurdish and Sunni, parties.

However, a coalition of Kurdish, Sunni and secular nationalist parties fiercely opposed al-Jaafari's candidacy, because of his inept leadership as interim Prime Minister, and especially his inability to control the escalating violence in the wake of the Samarra mosque bombing and rein in the Ministry of Interior "death squads" who are widely known to engage in the systematic killing of Sunnis. As the political impasse continued with al-Jaafari's adamant refusal to relinquish his candidacy, and as political violence pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war, opposition to his candidacy began to emerge even within the UIA. Under intense pressure from the United States, and nudged by the threat of an alternative Kurdish-Sunni-secular nationalist majority coalition forming and nominating and approving its own candidate for Prime Minister, the UIA political leadership led by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani forced al-Jaafari on 20 April 2006 to relinquish his position, opening the way for the formation of a unity government.

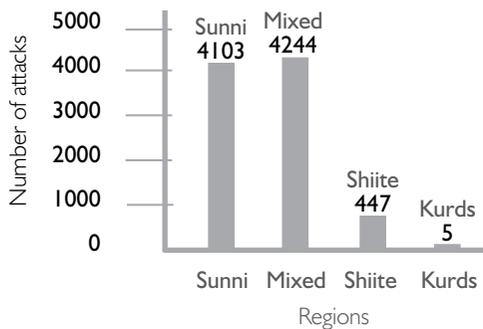
#### THE POLITICS AND PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE

The formation of a unity government will not immediately stop the violence gripping Iraq, but it is an essential first step in creating a favorable political environment for weakening, and eventually removing, the incentives for the use of violence, especially by the Sunni-led insurgency. *Violence in Iraq, in other words, is neither sectarian nor ethnic based. It is politically driven, and thus requires a political solution.*

The data in Figure 1 indicate the political underpinnings of the violence, and especially the Sunni basis of the insurgency. Of the 8799 reported insurgents and terrorist attacks between April 2004 and December 2005, 47% were concentrated in the two Sunni governorates of Anbar and Salahddin, while 48% were concentrated in the heavily mixed governorates of Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewa and Tameem with large Sunni concentrations. By contrast, only 5% of the attacks occurred in the nine Shiite majority governorates, and a negligible .06% in the three Kurdish governorates.

Also indicative of the political basis of violence are the variations in its incidence and intensity, as well as the differences in the groups and their motivations for engaging in it. For instance, the sharp increase in the

**Figure I**  
**Patterns of Political Violence in Iraq:**  
**April 2004–December 2005**



Source: Calculated by author from various sources

number and intensity of violence at the end of 2004 that peaked with the TNA elections in January 2005 was driven by a loose alliance of diehard Baathists, Sunni Islamic extremists, and Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM). The AQM is offshoot of Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network formed in Iraq by the Jordanian insurgent Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the political chaos that followed the US occupation. Implacably opposed to the US occupation and the emerging Shiite political power, these groups sought nothing less than the total removal of all foreign troops from Iraq and to halt the unfolding process of democratic transition. An undetermined number of fragmented groups of nationalist-secularist Sunnis, who accepted the demise of the Saddam regime but not the loss of Sunni political power, initially joined these extremist groups and, with the tacit support of the Sunni population who had been encouraged to boycott the TNA elections, engaged in political violence that was at the time directed principally at US and coalition forces.

However, the success of the TNA elections and the exclusion of the Sunnis from the constitution writing forced these moderate Sunni groups to reconsider their position and adopt a political strategy aimed at negotiating concessions on the new constitution in return for embracing the new democratic dispensation, combined with an armed strategy aimed at using low-intensity violence to bolster their negotiating position. This new strategy put the Sunni insurgents at odds with the diehard Baathists and led to armed clashes between them and the AQM, not the least because AQM was dominated by foreign jihadists (including Zarqawi) and because it relied heavily on suicide bombings that were killing growing numbers of Iraqis. But, coupled with the new IECI security measures, the new strategy also helped to reduce the level of violence and dramatically increase Sunni participation in the October constitutional

referendum and the December COR elections. The Sunni embrace of democratic transition enhanced the prospects of its success, forcing the diehard Baathists and the AQM to shift to sectarian violence in which Iraqi religious and political leaders and the new Iraqi police and military forces replaced the US and coalition forces as the principal targets.

The resounding success of the December elections in improving Sunni representation in the COR and participation in the new government precipitated the Samarra mosque bombing, most probably by AQM, as a last-ditch effort by extremists in the hope of unleashing retaliatory sectarian attacks that would destabilize the country and derail the democratic transition. That such attacks occurred with increasing frequency and frightening intensity in the immediate aftermath of the bombing before subsiding testifies less to the success of the extremists' tactics than to the disturbingly large numbers of Sunni and Shiite militias that have emerged in Iraq to fill the security vacuum created by inadequate US forces and the inexperience of the new Iraqi military and security forces. That these militias could themselves become the instruments of a prolonged Lebanon-style civil war cannot be discounted. To defuse this potentially explosive situation, the quick formation of government of national unity becomes all the more imperative.

#### CONCLUSION

On April 23, 2005, after weeks of hard and contentious bargaining that led to the replacement of Ibrahim Jaafari with his deputy Nouri al-Maliki as the candidate for Prime Minister, the COR, meeting only for the second time since the December elections, authorized the new candidate to form a cabinet within the stipulated 30 days and approved five key appointments that pave the way for the formation of a national unity government. The COR reappointed the current President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, and also appointed a Sunni and a Shiite as the two Vice-Presidents. It also elected a Sunni as the Speaker of the COR, and a Shiite and a Kurd as the two Deputy-Speakers.

These, however, are only the first steps. Jockeying for positions in the new cabinet will produce a new round of intense and possibly acrimonious bargaining. After the installation of the new cabinet, the new government will have to confront, among the host of problems facing Iraq, the twin and related challenges of security and economic reconstruction. Insecurity remains the single most important threat to Iraq's political stability. Confronting it will require convincing the remaining diehard Baathists that it is in their and the country's interest to accept the new reality. It will require defeating the AQM by killing the foreign jihadists who dominate it, simply because they will not give up without a fight. But most critically, it will require controlling and disbanding all the Sunni and Shiite militias that now provide much-needed security in a dangerously insecure

environment, for, if left unchecked, they could easily transform themselves into permanent protection rackets, as, for example, in Afghanistan.

Security is also essential for the much-needed economic reconstruction and development. Despite the investment of vast amounts of US funds, a variety of strategic and tactical mistakes that have become the hallmark of US policy in Iraq has contributed to the failure of the Iraqi economy to return even to its anemic pre-war levels.<sup>4</sup> Initial assessments based on flawed assumptions and intelligence viewed Iraq's enormous oil resource as a crucial source for financing the postwar reconstruction. But in response to the international embargo imposed on Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein cut back on the investments required to maintain and modernize the oil production facilities. Increased postwar oil production has thus been stymied by decaying infrastructure.

Compounding the problem has been the terrorist and insurgent attacks on the oil facilities, as well as on many postwar reconstruction projects, killing both foreign contractors and Iraqi workers. The diversion of increasingly larger amount of US reconstruction funds to the provision of security for these construction sites and oil refineries has, as a result, depleted the amount available for modernizing the oil facilities and financing the reconstruction projects.

The new Iraqi government, even one pragmatically negotiated on the basis of national unity and power-sharing, is unlikely to deal successfully on its own with these twin challenges, or, for that matter, with any of the other problems facing the shattered country. *US presence in Iraq is thus essential.* In the violent aftermath of the Samarra mosque bombing, both Shiites and the Sunnis have increasingly, and ironically, come to see the US presence as having a moderating effect on sectarian violence. Moreover, having invaded the country, we have an obligation to help Iraqis out of the political insecurity and economic disarray our policies and actions have caused.

National self interest, not altruism, dictates this obligation. To fulfill it, however, requires us to refocus our misguided concern with bringing the troops home to the more important concern with our strategic national interests in the Middle East as the overriding goal of our Iraq policy. The Bush administration has been inexcusably derelict in articulating that national interest and its relationship to its Iraq policy. But that does not mean that there are no strategic US national interests in the Middle East, or that they are unrelated to our actions in

4. For the latest and the best assessment of the failure of US postwar reconstruction policy in Iraq, see David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2005)

Iraq. The important US strategic interests in the Middle East include: coping with Iran's nuclear ambition and the threat it poses to Israel, Saudi Arabia and the region; combating al-Qaeda and its terrorist networks (a goal totally unrelated to the invasion of Iraq); keeping the Persian Gulf oil supply line open (not to feed US appetite for oil, since our consumption of Middle East oil is negligible, but to keep the European and Japanese economies that depend on it strong, and to maintain a stable world oil market); and promoting democracy as an indispensable tool in the fight against terrorism. The US invasion (even though ill-timed and strategically misguided in implementation, but correct in its central objective of removing Saddam Hussein) and the occupation of Iraq (despite the many mistakes in its implementation) are inextricably intertwined with these interests.

Withdrawing US troops from Iraq in the near future is thus supremely irresponsible. President Bush has responsibly decided that US troops will not be withdrawn, but has irresponsibly failed, again, to justify that decision in terms of the important US national interests at stake in Iraq and the Middle East. Whether the next administration will act more responsibly will depend on whether the American public will demand such responsibility. That, however, is very unlikely.

—Shaheen Mozaaffar is Professor of Political Science.