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On March 7 Iraq held nation-wide parliamentary elections that were a vitally important step in the development and sustainability of the state. The last time elections were held in December 2005 Sunnis, nearly a quarter of the population, boycotted and were largely excluded from participation in the government that formed afterwards. Iraq then faced a violent insurgency that many considered a civil war between the Shia majority and Sunni minority.

This time all segments of Iraq's populace took part in what is sure to be a close and contentious election battle. The diversity and number of candidates who ran is itself a testament to the progress Iraq has made since it was nearly torn apart by fighting only 3 years ago. However, it could also be a recipe for division and violence as none of the loosely bound coalitions has emerged from the heap to garner a majority of votes and earn the right to choose the next prime minister of Iraq.

The parliamentary election carries significant meaning for the future of Iraq for several reasons. First, the outcome will decide which party or coalition of parties will dominate the Iraqi government for the next four years. Although there are more than 6,000 individuals running in the election, the vast majority are members of a political party that has come together with other parties to form a handful of larger alliances putting forward a united front going into the election. The most notable of these alliances include: the Iraqi National Alliance, a Shia bloc that includes recognizable figures like Moqtada al-Sadr, former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Ahmed Chalabi; State Law, which includes Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's party that is self-described as non-sectarian and did well in the provincial elections; Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiya), a non-sectarian coalition that is made up of strong individual candidates like its leader Ayad Allawi but not particularly well known parties; and the Kurdish Bloc that consists of Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The cohesiveness of these alliances is questionable, however, and many are unsure that they will remain as solid entities capable of negotiating over issues like who will be Iraq's next prime minister.(1)

Beyond the make-up of the Baghdad government itself, the election will also color how the critical issues lingering in the country will be resolved. According to the UN Special Representative to Iraq the most important issues include: the administrative and territorial borders of the Kurdish region and federal Iraq, the oil revenue-sharing law, and the joint security arrangements for the region.(2) Perhaps the single place where all three of those issues come to a head is in Kirkuk. While being one of the most diverse cities in the country because of its

mix of Kurdish, Sunni, Shia, and Turcoman inhabitants, it also happens to be rich in natural resources. The city has been influx since the beginning of the American invasion because of the complexity of answering the question, who should actual be considered a citizen of Kirkuk, and how the city should be governed after that question is resolved. The Kurdish Regional Government has claimed that they should have authority over the city because the population is a majority Kurdish. However, the Baghdad government, along with Iraq's neighbors most notably Turkey and Iran, have objected to this proposal because of fears that inclusion of Kirkuk to the Kurdish region would give the KRG too much economic autonomy from Baghdad and too much control over an energy rich area, possibly leading to a push for Kurdish secession.

Exacerbating the situation has been the security arrangement for Northern Iraq. In addition to the American forces, the Kurdish militia group, Peshmerga, have helped ensure stability during the past years of sectarian violence in the country. The non-Kurdish residents of the region, particularly in Kirkuk, have objected to this arrangement because of the additional influence it has given the Kurds over the area. However, the Peshmerga and the KRG have thus far restrained from making any bold land grabs in the city; although in the summer of 2009 rising tensions between the Peshmerga and Iraqi forces over who had authority over which lands demonstrated the fragility of the situation.(3) Instead, the Kurds have done an effective job of using their participation in governance in Baghdad to pursue their interests. This election appears to have been no different as the province with the highest voter turnout was in Kurdish Duhuk which registered 80% participation.(4) With an eye to resolving outstanding issues like Kirkuk, the Kurds are expected to be an important force in the political bargaining which will soon begin. Similar to the 2005 election, whichever coalition the Kurdish bloc decides to join is likely to be the one that will form the majority in the next parliament.

One of the most important legislative tasks that awaits the new leadership will be to pass a law governing the oil industry of the country. To date, the auctions for rights to explore and develop oil and gas fields have all been done in the absence of a national agreement over how revenue generated by Iraq's resources will be shared among the populace. This problem is particularly visible in the northern area of Iraq where some 20% of Iraq's oil reserves are located.(5) The KRG began signing contracts with foreign firms in 2007 for development of fields in and around the Kurdish-run territory. This met with criticism from Baghdad because of the absence of any national agreement on how the process should be run. Some politicians have made the issue of passing an oil law part of their campaign push, perhaps partly to counter an appearance that the KRG is making Iraq's resources benefit them, but Baghdad has not had an effective counter to that. Prime Minister Maliki has billed himself as the candidate who can ensure the development of Iraq's ailing oil industry and therefore bring in billions of dollars that will help Iraq improve its local state infrastructure. For Iraqi citizens the oil law itself may not be a driver in who they voted for, however a hope that increased investment in Iraq could bring better civil services and projects may have been a factor in their consideration.

Beyond the important domestic issues of territorial control, oil sharing, and security arrangements, the election will also have a significant impact on larger and more regional issues facing Iraq: the influence of Iran and the withdrawal of American forces. Close ties between the powerful Shiite state and the Shiite dominated government in Baghdad have been a consistent feature in varying degrees of the new Iraqi political stage. Iran has openly been supportive of the Iraqi National Alliance, and is also believed to be give backing to a wider range of Shiite candidates and parties. As General Odierno, the top military commander in Iraq expressed, the US is monitoring the influence Iran wielded during the election and how it will influence the coming political negotiating games.(6) Sunni politicians are also keenly aware of the 'fact' of Iranian power in Iraqi politics. Unlike in 2005 when they boycotted the election, the higher participation of Sunnis this time, up to 75% voted in the province of Salahuddin, may alter this 'fact' by narrowing the margin of Shiite dominance in the parliament.(7)

A more inclusive political body in Baghdad is certainly part of what the US hopes to leave behind as President Barak Obama ends what has become an unpopular war with the American people. Baghdad and Washington have signed a Status of Forces Agreement that requires all American forces to exit the country by the end of 2011. However, despite insistence by Vice President Joe Biden that American withdrawal is imminent regardless of the rise in sectarian violence over the past months, the administration recently seemed to be backing away from such a firm stance. Comments from General Odierno indicated that concerns over a possible rise in bloodshed and turmoil following the parliamentary election are causing the US to reconsider its withdrawal timeline and perhaps extend its stay if the security situation deteriorates significantly.(8) In the days following the election it has become clear that while some 38 lives were lost there was not any massive disruption of the voting process. Obama praised the professionalism of the Iraqi security forces and said that the removal of American troops will "responsibly" continue.(9) As the official vote totals are calculated and announced in the coming weeks the reaction from the losing parties and their supporters will be viewed as an important indicator of how well Iraq can contain differing ambitions within the political realm. However, it is unclear what level of deterioration in security would cause Obama to conclude withdrawal under the current plan to be "irresponsible" and therefore in need of delay.

The coming months will continue to be critically important for the future of Iraq. How the next government is composed will not only affect Iraq's outstanding domestic issues but also the relationship between Baghdad and Tehran as well as the American departure. With the participation of all segments of the populace the process is off to a good start. It will now take a high level of political skill from all sides involved to find a constructive way forward in building the next government of Iraq.

Notes:

1- http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40283

2- http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=2814

3- http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/03/iraq.kurds

4- http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-03/10/c_13205576.htm

5- http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Iraq/Oil.html

6- http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/7386034/Shadow-of-Iran-hangs-over-Iraqi-elections.html

7- http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-fg-iraq-turnout9-2010mar09,0,6430775.story

8- http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/02/22/AR2010022202933.html

9- http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/03/07/AR2010030703452.html