

Iraq's Elections cannot be delayed

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Anybody who wants to postpone Iraq's elections should have been in Najaf, the Shia Muslim stronghold, in August and September. The battle there lasted three times as long as the recent fight in Fallujah and ended in stalemate. Even with Najaf now quiet, a stroll through Sadr City - the other epicentre for Iraq's majority Shia population - is sobering enough.

Shia rage in Iraq is frightening. It is not the nasty violence of a deposed minority - the car bombs and backstreet massacres, the assassinated doctors and fleetingly occupied police stations. It is much bigger: the seismic, street-swelling anger of a large and impatient majority.

For now the Shia are quiet, and for good reason. Unless the Sunni Arabs (Iraq's Kurds, too, are primarily Sunni) who brutalized them under Saddam Hussein and ruled for the previous 500 years steal it from them again, freedom is coming. On January 30, when Iraqis are scheduled to go to the polls, it will become a reality.

Various calls to delay these elections underestimate the depth of Shia desire, ignore Iraq's constitution and offer an election veto to a small Sunni minority of Ba'athists and Salafist fundamentalists. With party lists for the elections officially due today, the larger Sunni groups, including the Iraqi Islamic party, have already submitted their candidates.

Iraq is no exception to the rule that all politics is local. The Sunni Arab push against the poll is not about the injustice of foreign occupation. If it were, Shia, Kurds and moderate Sunni would join the fight. It is a function of Iraq's sectarian struggle. The Sunni who propagate the violence are Ba'athists, foreigners and radical Islamists who do not want any elections - ever. Giving them a veto over democratic rights for the other 90 per cent of Iraq is like giving them a veto over Christmas: they hate the very idea of it, will never participate in it and should not be allowed to ruin it for everyone else.

Paul Bremer, the former US administrator in Iraq, had reason to allow Ali al-Sistani, the Shia spiritual leader, to wield so much influence in the last six months of the US-led administration. Upsetting the Shia would be far worse than upsetting the radical Sunni fringe. Iraq's Shia are three times as numerous as its Sunni Arabs and have real leaders and consistent aims. They overwhelmingly support the cause of a timely vote. Shia urgency in Iraq is fuelled by centuries of waiting, and the Shia faith is founded on a sense of injustice and disenfranchisement.

There are important secondary reasons why the vote should proceed as scheduled. The January 30 deadline is mandated by Iraq's constitution; no mechanism exists to amend this provision before a new parliament oversees the creation of a new constitution, which it must do by February 2006. January 30 was chosen on November 21 by an independent, broad-based Iraqi Election Commission selected by a United Nations-sponsored government in which every Sunni group - except the old Ba'ath party - is represented.

From the US perspective, it is never a rational counterinsurgency policy to reward the violence of the other side. Making the absence of violence in Sunni-dominated areas a pre-condition for voting would mean there could never be a vote as long as even a few hundred Sunni prefer otherwise. This would be catastrophic for the 90 per cent of Iraq that prefers not to go back to the 8th century, (as the Salafists want), or even back to the 1990s (as their Ba'athist partners want). Any future date will be by definition illegitimate once this impossible "absence of violence" standard has been acknowledged.

Opponents of a timely vote sometimes mention fears of a Shia theocracy in Iraq. If these fears are a legitimate cause for delay, it is the vote itself that is to blame, not the date. Related concerns about the nature of Shia majority rule, meanwhile, are overblown. Iraq's Shia will never be Iranian puppets, as some fear. They are Arabs and the Iranians are Persians. The ethnic difference trumps the faith similarity, as in the Iran-Iraq war when Iraqi Shia fought with their fellow Arabs against their Iranian co-religionists. Even those Iraqi Shia who have been close to Iran for decades will drift from their former masters once in power.

Predictions of an Iran-style theocracy in Iraq are equally bogus. For one thing, the Iraqi Shia tradition eschews clerical participation in formal politics; the Iranian tradition is very different. In any case, Iraq's federalist constitution does not allow for this sort of imposition across sectarian and ethnic lines. Even if the national structure allowed it, the Shia have no muscle to impose their will across these lines.

Iraqi Shia do not want a repressive religious state. I have discussed this at length with senior leaders of their main factions - including the Mahdi Army, the most radical group. While the young guns of Najaf note that even the Virgin Mary wore a headscarf, they promise that, if they were in charge, they would respect confessional differences. They will not be in charge, having accepted about 12 per cent of the parliamentary seats of the recently announced Shia-dominated coalition that is set to win the

election. The other 88 per cent of seats are for parties that are moderately religious, secular or not Shia at all.

Either way, the Iranian bogeyman is a particularly sloppy piece of cod-historicism. The point about the Iranian theocracy is that it is not democratic. It came to power in a violent revolution and would lose a fair election in a landslide. With Iranians looking increasingly desperate to vote Iranian theocracy out, why would Iraqis want to vote it in?

Afghanistan, with much closer historical and cultural links to Iran, did not elect a bunch of fanatical Islamists last month. Across the world, wherever it has been advanced, Islamism is a failure as an electoral movement. Theocracies happen when you deny democracy, not when you allow it.