

Looking for Purple Fingers in Sadr City

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BAGHDAD, Iraq — DEMOCRACY won in a landslide yesterday here in Sadr City, the epicenter of Iraqi politics. Iraq's Shiites outnumber its Sunni Arabs by five to one, and when they rise up, this Baghdad slum is where they do it. Yesterday they rose up again, but this time it was with ballots, not with guns.

Mortar shells rained down on the ghetto at the beginning and end of the voting day, sporadic gunfire rattled through the smog, and at least one car bomb rounded out the predictable symphony of violence. But inside the Martyr Primary School, which was transformed for a day into Polling Station No. 119011, there were long lines of young men in Real Madrid and Lazio soccer jerseys, women in black body coverings, old tribesmen from the deserts and marshes in ankle-length dusty robes.

I watched people slide their ballots into the clear plastic boxes and dip their forefingers in the purple ink (to help poll workers combat fraud). In the afternoon I walked for a few miles and spoke with dozens of adults. About four-fifths told me they had voted, showing off their inky fingers.

Of course, there are always doubters. Many observers will say that because turnout among Sunni Arabs was low, their underrepresentation in the new government will undermine the election's legitimacy. Iraq's violence is a Sunni phenomenon, and fears of violence at the polling stations were especially strong in Sunni cities like Ramadi and Falluja, mixed municipalities like Mosul, and Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad. I have a friend named Sohair Chalabi, a 55-year old economist from Mosul, who was one of the Sunni Arabs too frightened to vote. A month ago he found his name on a list pinned to the door of a local mosque, with a note saying that those on it would be killed if they continued to participate in the electoral process. He has since fled to Baghdad, and two of the other nine people on the list have been killed.

Yet when I asked him what he thought of elections in which he and much of his community had been unable to vote, he said, "it's not a big problem. The real election is at the end of this year." He is right. Yesterday's vote was the first stage in a sophisticated, yearlong constitutional process that leaves plenty of flexibility for the challenges created by Iraq's combination of disorder and identity-based politics.

Iraqis are scheduled to go to the national polls twice more this year: in October for a referendum on the permanent constitution that the new assembly is charged with writing, and again in December to elect a new government under the rules of that constitution. Each of the country's

three main groups - Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shiites - has a veto over the permanent constitution. And each enjoys a de facto veto as well: not one is strong enough to impose majoritarian misrule on the others.

It would be blatantly against Shiite and Kurdish interests for either group to try to take advantage of any Sunni parliamentary underrepresentation. They have been waiting centuries for this opportunity, and the last thing they want is to make their country ungovernable.

Federalism, enshrined in the interim constitution, is another safety valve. "Regional autonomy will not tear Iraq apart," said Ahmad Chalabi, the clever Shiite politician who, although now disowned by the Americans who long sponsored him, will be a central figure in the new government. "It is the only way to keep it together."

More important, it is not likely that yesterday's low turnout among Sunnis will lead to their dramatic underrepresentation in the Assembly. The latest estimates put Sunni Arabs at a little less than 13 percent of Iraq's population. Yet there were 50 to 60 Sunni Arabs in viably high slots on yesterday's ballots - even if just 40 Sunnis are elected, that would be 15 percent of the 275-seat assembly.

The candidate list compiled by the Shiite religious leadership, the United Iraqi Alliance, had 11 Sunni Arabs from Mosul alone, as well as the head of Iraq's largest Sunni tribe. Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's secular list also had many Sunnis. So did the lists of the monarchists, Socialists, Communists and others. And now the betting is that a Sunni will be named to head one of the big three ministries in the new government: foreign, defense or interior. Sunnis will also likely get a vice presidency of the state and the presidency of the Assembly.

None of this is by accident. Car bombs might make headlines, but the real politics in Iraq is about something much deeper than the fanaticism of the country's 5,000 or 10,000 terrorists. The people who are going to run Iraq are profoundly pragmatic.

The Kurdish leaders in the valleys of the north, the Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the alleys of Najaf, the radical Shiite Moktada al-Sadr in his hiding place - all understand what they have achieved over the last two years. By showing great restraint toward one another's communities and a spectacular patience with the necessary evil of American occupation, they have woven together the long, improbable, unfinished carpet of an Iraqi future.

This attitude of restraint is echoed on the street. A 34-year-old Shiite engineer I met in Sadr City last week told me, "If we had wanted revenge on the Sunnis, we would have taken it in 2003." Soldiers in Mr. Sadr's Mahdi Army told me that their leader has sent them to pray with Sunnis and to provide security at their mosques. And the widespread campaign of Sunni extremist violence against Shiites has been met with deafening forbearance.

Iraq as a nation never rose up against the occupation, and after yesterday it does not need to. Iraqis have just elected the only legitimate government between Istanbul and New Delhi. The prestige and moral force of popular representation cannot be denied, even by Washington. When the Iraqi government tells the Americans to leave, they will not be able to stay. Whether a little too soon or a little too late, this is the way it is supposed to be.

I write this from a rundown house in the poorest slum in the Middle East. Until yesterday, my hosts and neighbors had for three decades been among the most repressed people on earth. Yet when I walk out the door, I see a city smothered in posters and banners from a hundred political parties. Like Afghanistan last year, the country has endorsed the right to vote in percentages that shame the electoral apathy of the rich world. Let nobody tell you that this election was anything but real. Iraq's Baathists and Wahhabis may continue to bark, but this caravan is moving on.