Post-Saddam democratization in Iraq: an assessment of March 2010 elections

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Turning Iraq into a democracy that would serve as a model for the rest of the region was one of the main arguments that the Bush Administration employed to justify its invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The 'democracy-building' argument began to be repeated ad infinitum as the U.S.-led occupation failed to discover any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – the other main argument that had been used to justify Iraqi invasion.

To bring the promised democracy into Iraq, the U.S. initiated a political process which took many turns, manifest in its varying approach towards elections; at times envisaging early elections; at times toying with the idea of an indefinite postponement. However, as a combination of factors made the U.S. realize that indefinite postponement was not a feasible option, it laid out a roadmap that envisaged holding nation-wide elections in January 2005 for the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) and in December 2005 for a four-year-term national government. After the completion of the first term of parliament, second parliamentary elections were held on March 7, 2010.

The U.S. has made much of these elections, almost equating them with democracy itself. This study is aimed at ascertaining the extent to which these elections have served to meet the broader goals of democratization in the post-Saddam Iraq. The study particularly focuses on the March 7 elections, while touching upon the earlier ones and the transitional phase of the U.S.-led political process to explain the political backdrop to the March 7 elections.

This study argues that the U.S.-led political process in general and the elections in particular have won only limited success in democratizing Iraq: They have put in place a system wherein political power and legitimacy have to be won through popular mandate. However, they have failed to bring about political reconciliation between various ethno-sectarian groups by failing to resolve contentious issues of critical import. The failure resulted mainly from inappropriate U.S. policies which in turn was the outcome of the U.S. desire to steer the political process along its preferred course instead of letting the political dynamics play out autonomously.

The prospects of the emergence of robust national institutions including a genuinely national and cross-sectarian government which does not adopt a 'winner takes all' approach, appear to be bleak even after the March 7 elections. With the country bitterly divided along ethno-sectarian lines, State capacity fragile, resolution of divisive issues far from certain, and the U.S. troops' pull back impending, Iraq's democratization process appears all the more fragile, susceptible to a complete breakdown reversing whatever little gains have so far been made. The failure assumes horrendous proportions when viewed against the backdrop of the immeasurable human loss the

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Iraqis had to suffer as the result of the U.S.-led invasion. The study thus questions the very logic of bringing democracy into a foreign country through military means.

The study is divided into three parts. The first part explains the background of the U.S. democracy-promotion efforts in Iraq and discusses the transitional phase of the political process before the January 2005 elections. The second part discusses the electoral exercises undertaken in 2005 and why they failed to usher in an inclusive political order in Iraq. The final part of the study focuses on the March 7 elections in a detailed manner; discussing the pre-election environment, major electoral blocks, and the results' implications - domestic, regional, and for the U.S. policy in Iraq. The conclusion then follows.

Background

Ever since the days of President Woodrow Wilson, promoting democracy abroad has been a salient element in U.S. foreign policy. Post-9/11, promoting democracy gained even more salience, given the "moral and strategic imperatives for advancing freedom around the world."[1] During this phase, America's efforts at democracy-promotion particularly focused on the Middle East as the region's alleged 'democracy-deficit' was being held responsible for engendering violent anti-U.S. feelings among its people which led to the catastrophic incidents of 9/11. In fact, these incidents gave rise to a consensus in Washington that promoting democracy in the Middle East "would drain the pool from which terrorist organizations draw recruits in their global struggle against the U.S."[2]

Thereafter, while other authoritarian regimes in the region did come under pressure from the U.S. to introduce political reforms, it was Saddam Hussain's Iraq that was singled out for regime change. The highly influential neo-conservative lobby in the U.S. seized upon the opportunity offered by the momentous happenings on 9/11 to push regime change in Iraq – their cherished goal since the mid-1990s - to the top of U.S. foreign policy agenda.

To justify the invasion of the sovereign Iraqi State, the Bush Administration built its case on two main planks: by highlighting i) the danger posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) allegedly possessed by Iraq, and ii) the prospects of democracy sweeping the entire Middle East in the wake of the emergence of a democratic Iraq following Saddam Hussain's ouster. One of the clearest articulations of these arguments - belaboured by a number of high-ranking U.S. officials – came from the president himself, only a few weeks before Iraq was invaded.

In his famous speech at the American Enterprise Institute on February 26, 2003, George W. Bush accused the dictator [Saddam] of building weapons that could allow him to dominate the Middle East and intimidate the civilized world; raised the discomforting spectre of Saddam passing on these weapons to the terrorists to be used against the U.S.; and vowed not to let it happen, threatening to use force to remove this danger. He then enumerated the benefits of regime change in Iraq that would accrue to the people in Iraq and in the rest of the region, declaring that it would free the Iraqi people themselves and "a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example for other nations in the region."[3]

Having thus built its case, the U.S., assisted by a 'Coalition of the Willing', attacked Iraq on March 20, 2003, which led to the collapse of the Saddam regime on April 9, 2003, paving the way for the U.S.-led occupation of the country and a U.S.-initiated political process with the avowed goal of turning Iraq into a model democracy. The 'democracy-building' argument, it's worth mentioning, began to be repeated ad infinitum as all other pretexts for war fell apart as no WMDs were discovered, nor any relations between Saddam regime and al-Qaeda could be established. Now the official U.S. rhetoric tended more and more to describe the Iraq war as have been intended to establish democracy in that country that would be the locomotive pulling reforms in the entire region.[4]

The political process set in motion by the occupation to democratize Iraq involved initially putting in place appointed bodies before holding a series of direct elections, with the most recent one on March 7, 2010. Taking place almost seven years after the regime change in Iraq, and following the completion of the first term of parliament, the March 7 elections offer a vantage point to assess the extent to which the U.S. efforts at democratising Iraq have succeeded.

However, before venturing into undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the March 7 elections, it seems appropriate to briefly overview the initial phase of the U.S.-sponsored political process in post-Saddam Iraq as management of this transitional phase has had an overwhelming influence over the course of subsequent political developments in the country.

Translating vision into reality: what went wrong

A glimpse into the Bush Administration's planning about post-war Iraq shows that it lacked any appreciation of the nature and magnitude of the challenges that were likely to emerge in the wake of regime change in Iraq and could make it ever more difficult for the Administration to realize its avowed goal of turning Iraq into a model liberal democracy.

The initial assumption was that the invading troops would be greeted by the Iraqi people as liberators. The Administration was confident that the Iraqi street would "erupt in joy in the same way the throngs in Kabul greeted the Americans."[5] This optimism was mainly the result of the Administration's heavy reliance on the input of the Iraqi Opposition figures that had been living in exile.

The initial plan for the post-war Iraq envisaged installing the leaders of six exiled and Kurdish groups who had been working closely with the U.S. Defence Department as the leaders of the post-Saddam government, to be called Iraqi Interim Authority (IIA), which was to be tasked with drafting a constitution and arranging for elections to install a sovereign Iraqi government as soon as possible.[6] In fact, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, backed by Deputy Secretary of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, and Secretary of State, Collin Powell, put a timeframe for organizing elections in terms of months.[7]

The inherent flaws in this conception are obvious. Not only did it discount any probability of widespread opposition to the occupation forces by the Iraqis, it also

suggested as if the seeds of democracy were ready to germinate in Iraq only if the climate of fear and oppression sustained by Saddam's tyrannical regime dissipated. It failed to take into account the pitfalls in the way of transformation of an authoritarian State into a democratic one. The idea of holding elections 'in terms of months' totally disregarded the previous experience of post-conflict political transitions which underscores the need and importance of lengthy negotiations and compromises among different factions to develop a final political framework which is underpinned by a consensus regarding the rules of political competition.[8]

It failed also to appreciate how onerous the task of democratizing an ethnically and religiously (read sectarian) mixed society would be. In fact, plenty of evidence exists to suggest that during the early phase of democratization, tensions along ethno-religious lines may be heightened because the "very nature of democratic legitimacy provides incentives for formulating ethnic and nationalist claims and mobilizing followers along ethnic lines."[9] The Administration's plans did not seem to have taken into account any such considerations. Appointing a couple of politicians from each ethnic and sectarian group on the governing bodies would be sufficient, the Administration's planning seemed to suggest, to keep all ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq on the side of the occupation and to prevent any fissures from developing along ethno-sectarian lines in Iraq's post-Saddam polity.

The omission seemed all the more glaring given the fact that the distribution of power in Saddam's Iraq had disproportionately favoured the minority Sunni Arabs. Even some modest steps towards democracy in the post-Saddam Iraq would entail rectifying this historical anomaly, producing winners and losers. Ensuring that these winners and losers abide by the rules of peaceful political competition should have been the primary focus of any post-war planning. This aspect, however, was altogether missing in America's post-Saddam policy which led to the various ethno-sectarian groups developing extremely hostile attitudes towards each other – the hostility that has persisted during the subsequent phases of political transition and has marred the prospects of political reconciliation.

The hope of inheriting a functioning State after ousting Saddam Hussain showed the lack of planners' understanding of State-society relations in Iraq. Little did they realize that Iraq under the Baath regime had been a State largely external to and an imposition upon society with the former frequently resorting to violence in order to control the latter. In Baathist Iraq, the social forces that preserved the apparatus of the State and helped it earn allegiance of society did not exist to a substantial degree. Removing the ruler in such a State was to lead to the collapse of the State itself.[10]

It was therefore more than likely that the developments would unfold in a way contrary to the U.S. expectations – and so it happened, exposing the flawed nature of the Administration's assumptions and resulting in its plans running into serious trouble. The collapse of Iraq's public infrastructure and urban security apparatus that made majority of Iraq's ministries unusable, growth of indigenous Iraqi political forces with hostile attitude towards the occupation, most notably Moqtada al-Sdar's movement, and the emergence of local militias throughout most of Iraq taking control of State buildings and finances led to the collapse, by May 2003, of the initial plan of handing power over to an elected Iraqi authority via the IIA.[11]

Subsequently, the occupation forces laid out a new political roadmap that envisaged a protracted engagement with Iraq which was to be steered by the newly-established Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under the leadership of L. Paul Bremer. Elections were deferred far into the future. The idea of installing the IIA was abandoned. Instead, an 'advisory body', the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), was formed on July 13, 2003. The 25-member IGC was invested with only limited powers. Its decisions could be vetoed by the CPA. The CPA and the IGC instituted a Transitional Administration Law (TAL) on March 8, 2004, which stipulated the appointment of an Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) by June 30, 2004 and holding nation-wide elections for Transitional National Assembly (TNA) in January 2005.[12]

The new roadmap too, however, failed to steer the country towards a democratic political order. Instead, many of the steps taken during this phase resulted in entrenching sectarianism in the country and widening the ethno-sectarian schisms that had surfaced in the wake of the regime change in Iraq.

The fundamental flaw in the approach adopted by the CPA was that instead of having wide consultations with, and reaching out to, most sections of Iraqi society, it limited its engagement to a narrow group of pro-U.S. political leaders which resulted in the CPA's failure in ushering in an inclusive political process. This approach was partly the result of the dynamics of post-Saddam politics slipping out of U.S. control which led to the policies aimed at bolstering the position of U.S. allies in Iraq and suppressing anti-U.S. elements. It also highlighted the inherent contradiction in the U.S. approach towards democracy in Iraq: it had deposed a dictator to initiate a political process to usher in democracy but at the same time was striving to ensure that the process did not produce results unpalatable for the U.S. even if that required steps cutting against the grain of democracy.

This contradiction was evident even in President Bush's February 2003 speech at the American Enterprise Institute wherein he had said: "The United States has no intention of determining the precise form of Iraq's new government. That choice belongs to the Iraqi people. Yet, we will ensure that one brutal dictator is not replaced by another."[13] Though the idea of preventing another dictator from taking over Iraq might appear to be noble, it in effect meant putting checks on the will of Iraqi people and limiting their choice in "determining the precise form of Iraq's new government."

This contradiction was manifest throughout the transition period. One of the earliest steps taken by the CPA was to halt all local elections in Iraq and opting instead to appoint mayors and administrators. These elections which had been taking place in most areas of Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the regime change could have had hugely positive impact upon the post-Saddam political milieu. Not only would they have established democratic models at local level which would have been easy to replicate at the national level, they would have also produced local leaders with credibility and legitimacy. Through these elections, local issues and not ethno-sectarian identities would have emerged as the fulcrum of Iraqi politics. In fact, these local elections would have helped "soften or deemphasize the major identity cleavages in the country," besides applying "some brake on the political tendency of elections in [the] post-conflict

situation to become an identity referendum or a deeply ideological and symbolic process."[14]

The halting of these elections was clearly meant to put a check on the dynamics of politics in Iraq which appeared to be slipping out of U.S. control and taking the course which the U.S. perceived was at variance with its interests and policies. The CPA head, Paul Bremer, when asked about this policy, had said, "I'm not opposed to it [local self-rule], but I want to do it [in] a way that takes care of our concerns ... Elections that are held too early can be destructive."[15]

By preferring appointments over elections, the CPA initiated the trend of selective engagement that was to become the hallmark of the transitional phase. From the appointment of the IGC to the drafting of the constitution and the appointment of the IIG, the underlying assumption seemed to be to make decisions through agreement among narrow political elites instead of engaging the wider segments of Iraqi public.

The IGC was composed predominantly of exiles, many of whom did not have a domestic constituency. It failed to include many important actors such as the Arab nationalist groups, the more radical wing of the Shia and important Sunni religious leaders. Even after the formation of the IGC, nothing substantial was done to involve the groups outside the Council in the discussions on the future of the country.[16] For adopting such an approach, the IGC was criticized even by Lakhdar Brahimi, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General, who said that the IGC was in the process of deciding important issues for the country and committing the Iraqi government in the long-term without engaging in extensive discussions or holding elections.[17]

Besides, the members of the IGC were chosen on the basis of their ethnic and religious affiliations. Among the IGC members were 13 Shia Arabs, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Christian and one Turkmen.[18] Apportioning the IGC membership along ethno-sectarian lines is widely considered to be among the first of a series of decisions taken by the CPA that helped entrench sectarianism in Iraqi politics.[19]

A similar lack of consultation with wider segments of political spectrum was witnessed during the course of adopting the TAL. The CPA and the IGC showed little realization of the significance of a participatory constitution-making process which "can provide a forum for the negotiation of the solutions to the divisive or contested issues …. can also lead to the democratic education of the population, begin a process of healing and reconciliation through societal dialogue, and forge a new consensus vision of the future of the State."[20] The importance of such a process increases manifold in ethnically or religiously divided societies, such as Iraq, where the State represents more than a single ethnic or religious group and where the entire division of State functions and institutional power has to reflect the concerns of diverse communities.[21] In fact, some scholars have insisted that democratization process initiated under an externally imposed 'liberation' can succeed only if the constitution-making process escaped imposition and became autonomous.[22]

However, the way the TAL was adopted was far from autonomous and bore every mark of imposition. Much has been written about the shadowy manner in which the TAL was adopted. Whatever debate about the TAL took place; it took place within the IGC.

In fact, credible evidence exists to suggest that even some of the IGC members might not have been fully aware of the exact contents of the TAL. As Andrew Arato has written, "the final draft was entirely unavailable until the actual signing and was thus exposed to no criticism until the five Shiite members of the Governing Council threatened not to sign the document."[23] The Sunnis too objected to the manner in which the law was being drafted and declared it illegitimate. Thus, the TAL did not represent a broad-based political consensus on the country's transitional framework and failed to draw into the process all the key political leaders and constituencies.[24]

The U.S. policy of tightly managing the transition process with little openings for consultations was manifest also in the formation of the IIG in June 2004, which marked the formal political handover to Iraqis. The composition of the IIG differed little from the outgoing IGC. Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia, and Ghazi al-Yawir, a Sunni Arab, were the prime minister and president of the IIG, respectively.[25] These and other appointments in the IIG were in effect made by the U.S. without holding any consultations with different segments of population. In fact, the formation of the IIG was the continuation of the U.S. policies in Iraq whereby "evolving strategies to create democratic State structures [had] consistently relied on the promotion of U.S. allies and the exclusion of its adversaries."[26]

Thus, during the transitional phase, the U.S. concerned itself more with preserving its own and allies' interests instead of reaching out to wider segments of the Iraqi political spectrum. It was mainly due to this approach that the political process failed to convince all segments of Iraqi society of its transparency and efficacy. So, as Iraq approached the first post-Saddam elections in January 2005, the country stood violently divided along ethno-sectarian lines – a division which could exacerbate as the country was going to be exposed to the competitive pressures of electoral politics.

Bringing democracy to Iraq: putting faith in elections

As laid out in the TAL, the first post-Saddam national elections were held on January 30, 2005, for a 275-seat TNA which was to draft a constitution by August 15, 2005 to be put to referendum by October 15, 2005. Following the approval of the constitution in the referendum, elections were to be held on December 15, 2005 for a full-term national government.[27]

The January elections were largely boycotted by the Sunni community. In the Sunni-dominated al-Anbar province, turnout was less than two per cent. The Moqtada al-Sadr, whose militia had been engaged in heavy fighting with the U.S. troops, also boycotted. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA); which comprised major Shia parties like the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Fadilah, and Daawa which were believed to have closed ranks at Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's behest; emerged as the single largest block, winning 140 seats. The Kurdistan Alliance was a distant second with 75 seats.[28]

It took a couple of months' wrangling before a transitional government could emerge and the process for drafting the permanent constitution could start. Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was elected president and Da'awa's Ibrahim al-Jafari became the prime minister.

Following the government formation, the TNA turned its attention towards the drafting of the constitution. The process had provided the U.S. with an opportunity to redress its earlier mistakes by winning over the confidence of disgruntled Sunnis, thereby laying the foundations of a stable political order in Iraq. Regrettably, this opportunity too was lost.

The constitution-drafting process faced a dilemma from the outset. The TAL required that the drafting committee be composed of the TNA members, but the very little presentation of Sunnis in the TNA meant only two out of the committee's 55 members would be Sunni. Realizing the fact that a constitution drafted by such a committee would lack credibility with the Sunni population, 15 Sunni members from outside the TNA were inducted into the committee.[29] However, even this improvisation could not succeed in winning Sunnis' confidence because the committee rarely met with most of the drafting done by constitutional committee's chair – Hamam al-Hammudi, a cleric from SCIRI. The text of the constitution finally circulated on August 28, did not have the endorsement of any Sunni Arab politician.[30]

In yet another bid to win Sunni support, only four days before the October 15 referendum, a few changes were made to the constitution, including a provision for a subsequent review process, but it could induce only one Sunni party to support the approval of the constitution.[31] Sunnis therefore voted against the constitution in the referendum, which was nevertheless approved as it received overwhelming support from the Shias and the Kurds. The Sunnis had tried to take advantage of a clause in the TAL which stipulated that the constitution would be rejected if two-thirds of voters in any three provinces voted against it. The Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salahuddin had a 97 per cent and 82 per cent 'no' vote, respectively, but the 'no' vote in Nineveh province was only 55 per cent.[32] This was the first time that the Sunnis had displayed the willingness to participate in the political process to safeguard their interests.

By failing to win the Sunni support for the constitution, the U.S. lost yet another opportunity to end the community's sense of marginalization and reach an agreement whereby all segments of society shared a common vision about the future of the State. The appeasement of the Sunnis was considered to be vital also for sapping the insurgency which was taking an exorbitant toll on the everyday lives of the Iraqi people as the Sunni marginalization and their disenchantment with the political process was widely deemed to be feeding into the insurgency. What was even more disturbing was that TAL's Article 61 (F) which had provided for a possible six-month extension for the constitution-drafting process, was not availed by the U.S. even though several Kurdish and Shia leaders had expressed their willingness for availing this opportunity.[33] This omission seems particularly disturbing given that the constitutional drafting committee had less than eight weeks to complete the task. The repercussions of this hasty process were succinctly summarized in a United States Institute of Peace report[34]:

The rushed constitutional process hindered Sunni Arabs' emerging confidence in an Iraqi federal model; amplified imbalances in respective camps' technical negotiating competencies; removed opportunities for international mediation, in particular UN assistance; increased U.S. visibility as an agent and participant in the Iraqi negotiations; and excluded meaningful Iraqi citizen participation.

Subsequently, on December 15, 2005, elections for a full-term national government were held which attracted considerable Sunni participation resulting in the Iraqi Accord Front – the main Sunni block - winning 44 seats. The majority seats were still won by the UIA and the Kurdistan Alliance though their strength decreased mainly due to Sunni participation. After months of behind-the-scene negotiations, a compromise was reached when Daawa's Nuri al Maliki – a Shia - was elected as the prime minister.[35] Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, was re-elected as the president. A Sunni and a Shia, Tareq al Hashmi and Adel Abdul Mehdi became vice presidents, and a Kurd and a Sunni, Barham Saleh and Salam al Zobaie, were appointed as deputy prime ministers.[36] This distribution was done in accordance with communalist mathematics which underlined the disconcerting reality that the management of the transitional political process in Iraq had led the country to a state where sectarian politics had become an established fact of political life.

However, the ethno-sectarian fault lines emerging during the transitional phase of the political process were not to be addressed merely by accommodating the representatives of all major groups in the government. Instead of striving sincerely for national reconciliation, the various groups continued to pursue their narrow communal agendas. A major setback for political reconciliation came when the main Sunni party, the Iraqi Accordance Front, removed its six ministers from the cabinet in July 2007. Importantly, rewriting of the constitution was the main demand of the Front for their return to the cabinet.[37] Parliament failed also in settling the disputes between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the central government; the most glaring example of which was the latter's failure in holding the referendum in Kirkuk, which the constitution had required to be held by December 31, 2007, to ascertain whether its citizens wanted to join the KRG.[38]

Though the government did succeed in bringing down the level of violence, besides improving service delivery for the citizens, its performance was far from what the bitterly divided nation required. This has been commented on pithily in the following lines:[39]

> *Iraqi politics both in parliament and cabinet are dominated by a group of politicians furthering a highly divisive and sectarian agenda as the best way to guarantee their own influence over national politics. This has created a stagnant parliament unable to pass crucial legislation, as well as high levels of inefficiency and corruption all across the whole of the Iraqi State.*

The above discussion clearly shows that the enthusiasm with which the Bush Administration had embraced elections as the most efficient tool of democratizing Iraq was misplaced. The prevailing situation in Iraq made it abundantly clear that merely holding elections does not guarantee a stable and democratic political order. Elections, nevertheless, do facilitate democratization, provided they take place under suitable conditions and at the proper time. The literature on post-conflict and post-authoritarian political transitions clearly describes these conditions which are worth a brief overview before we proceed to discuss the March 7 elections in Iraq.

The importance of elections to a democracy cannot be overstated. It is axiomatic in liberal political tradition that "open and fair competition for power, structured around the popular vote inevitably leads to democracy."[40] The importance of elections for the

evolution of a democratic order has been highlighted also in the literature on post-conflict political transitions. Elections can, it has been argued, jump-start a new, post-conflict political order; stimulate the development of democratic politics, and confer legitimacy upon the new political order as the manifestation of people's will.[41] Besides, elections have huge propaganda value. They can be used to satisfy the wary public opinion in the West as a major step towards democracy by making the press "splash across national newspapers images of women supporting ink-marked fingers and colourful national costumes."[42] Elections, therefore, have become an overriding objective in most of the efforts at post-conflict democratization and nation-building.

The success of elections in meeting the broader goals of democratization, however, has been limited, a case in point being Iraq, making scholars attach certain caveats with the process if the elections have to deliver the desired results. The timing of elections is crucial as a "premature timetable for elections inhibits rather than enhance conditions for democracy."[43] Early elections in post-conflict societies, in the words of Lakhdar Brahimi "may well reinforce existing divisions and fault lines rather than create new bonds to promote mutual trust and cooperation."[44] Putting an end to violence has been cited as another prerequisite for the elections to be regarded as the manifestation of public's free will and as an instrument for bringing national reconciliation: "For free elections to be guaranteed …. one of the most important concerns is removing or minimizing any climate of intimidation."[45] The mechanics of electoral process - the electoral system and the electoral administration – is another factor which can profoundly impact on the success or failure of post-conflict democratization.[46]

But, the January and December 2005 elections took place under conditions which lacked all the basic requisites for any post-conflict election to move the country along the path to a stable democracy.

Elections were held too early. They were held before the occupation forces could win the trust of the country's major ethnic and sectarian groups and before these groups could develop a consensus over the rules of the political game. Nothing illustrates this more graphically than the vastly different attitudes that various ethno-sectarian groups developed towards the elections with Sunnis boycotting whereas the Shias and the Kurds overwhelmingly participating in them. The same trend was witnessed in the referendum held on October 15, 2005, with the Shia- and Kurdish-dominated governorates endorsing it by over 94 per cent of the voters whereas the Sunni-dominated al-Anbar opposing it by over 97 per cent of the votes.[47] Besides, after having been under an authoritarian regime for decades, Iraq needed more time to develop indigenous civic and political organizations with cross-sectarian appeal that could play their role in the emergence of a pluralistic political order in the country.

The January and December 2005 elections were held in an environment of extreme insecurity. Ever since the occupation started, Iraq had been in the grip of an ever-escalating insurgency involving former members of the security services, Baath party loyalists, and a wider and more diverse group of those opposed to the occupation.[48] In the January elections, insurgents threatened to kill anybody who voted. It was partly because of these threats that most of the Sunnis boycotted the elections. In Anbar, the turnout was merely two per cent. The American failure to improve security by containing

the insurgency thus caused an important section of society to eschew the political process, thereby undermining its legitimacy.

The mechanics of the electoral process too have elicited criticism from various observers of the politics in post-Saddam Iarq. The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) was formed only six months before the January elections. It, therefore, had very little time at its disposal to effectively administer the elections. It was probably due to this time constraint that the system of proportional representation (closed list) was chosen for the elections. Under that system, voters chose among competing 'political entities', which could be a party, a coalition of parties, or an individual running as an independent. In that system, the whole country was treated as a single district and the seats in the national assembly and in the provincial assemblies were allocated in proportion to a slate's showing in the voting.[49]

Though proportional representation has generally been preferred in ethnically-mixed societies, treating the whole country as a single list did not make any sense in Iraq's context and produced hugely negative consequences for the democratization process in the country. This turned out to be a major reason for the Sunni boycott of the January elections as the Sunnis perceived that the system would be detrimental to them and would cause them end up underrepresented because the system accorded seats on the basis of national vote totals.[50] Another drawback inherent in that system was that it precluded any possibility for local candidates, local identities, and local initiatives to emerge. This system was an important reason in the elections becoming an identity referendum where most people voted for the slate representing their sect or ethnic group. The choice of that system was yet another U.S. policy that helped entrench sectarianism in the country. The choice seemed to have been made to benefit established parties which were U.S. allies - another instance when the U.S. chose to sacrifice the interests of democracy at the altar of political expediency.

The above discussion delineates how a multitude of policy errors resulting mainly from the U.S. desire to steer the political process along its preferred course, created a political and security environment in Iraq where elections tended more to widen the existing cleavages than bridging them. So, as the country approached the second parliamentary elections in March 2020, many divisive issues were still unresolved. The pre-election bickering over the election law and the disqualifications issue further fuelled sectarian tensions. The following part of the paper takes a look at the pre-election environment, major electoral alliances and the various implications of the March 7 election results.

March 7, 2010 elections: pre-election environment

The pre-election political scene in Iraq was dominated by two main issues: the dispute over the election law and the disqualifications crisis. A brief overview of both the issues is given below.

Election law dispute

The elections were originally scheduled to be held on January 16, 2010, but had to be pushed back to March 7, 2010 due to differences over the electoral law which was

passed on November 8, 2009. The law, whose passage was a constitutional requirement before the elections could be held, was passed after considerable delay, having once been vetoed by one of the two vice presidents, Tariq al-Hashimi.[51]

The major stumbling block in the way of the passage of the law was the dispute over how to hold elections in Kirkuk. The law recognized Kirkuk as a governorate with dubious 'registers' requiring extra scrutiny in the electoral process. This was done much to the chagrin of the Kurds who did not want any special measures for elections in Kirkuk. The provision had been made at the insistence of the Arabs and the Turkmen in Kirkuk as well as Iraqi nationalists in the rest of the country who claimed that the electoral registers in Kirkuk had been tampered with by the Kurdish-dominated local government since 2004 with the aim of securing a Kurdish victory in any future referendum about the inclusion of Kirkuk in the Kurdistan federal region.[52] However, to appease the Kurds, the law stipulated using the 2009 food ration lists as representative of voter registration, instead of using the 2005 voter lists which presumably would have contained fewer Kurds.[53]

The second important issue decided by the law was the adoption of an 'open list', as used in the 2009 provincial elections, as opposed to the 'closed list' system used in the 2005 elections. In a 'closed list' system, party leaders decide who would sit in the assembly, whereas in an 'open list' system, party leaders have less flexibility in distributing seats. The Kurds had favoured the 'closed list' system, but both the Shias and the Sunnis favoured the 'open list' system. The law also expanded the size of the Council of Representatives (CoR) from 275 to 325.[54]

Disqualifications issue

Another major issue that erupted in the run-up to the elections and cast its shadow over the electoral process was the disqualification by the Justice and Accountability Commission of more than five hundred candidates from contesting elections. The candidates were disqualified because of suspected ties with the outlawed Baath party. Though some of the candidates belonged to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, majority belonged to secular and Sunni Arab-dominated parties.[55] Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Movement was most affected from the disqualifications as two of its leading candidates, Saleh al-Mutaliq and Dhafir al-Ani, both Sunnis, were barred from contesting.[56] The issue raised serious concerns about the transparency of the entire process. Even Iraqi President Jalal Talabani questioned the legality of the decision.

The support lent to the decision by main Shia parties further embittered inter-communal relations in Iraq as the Sunnis perceived the decision as being meant to weaken their position in the elections. At one point it was feared that the Sunnis might opt to boycott the elections which would have robbed the entire process of any vestige of legitimacy. The decision was viewed by many as blatant use of State apparatus by the incumbent premier to further his political interests. The move stood in sharp contrast to the reinstatement of 20,000 former army officers who had been dismissed from service under the Debaathification programme following the demise of the Saddam regime in April 2003. It strengthened the impression of selective application of laws by the Maliki government and was put down to political motives. "No doubt, this move is

related to the elections and it aims at gaining votes," said Maysoun al-Damlouji, a candidate from the Iraqi National Movement.[57]

The U.S. officials in Iraq and some Iraqi leaders implicated Iran as well, declaring the whole thing as "an Iranian game".[58] The crisis also triggered U.S. intervention as Vice President Joe Biden rushed to Baghdad to hold talks with Iraqi officials. Iraqi officials, however, were unrelenting. The crisis also showed the waning U.S. influence in Iraq.

Major political blocs

Iraq's political landscape at the time of the March 7 elections was altogether different from what it was in 2005 with the emergence of two major new blocs. The four largest blocs which ran in these elections are being introduced here.

Iraqi National Alliance (INA)

The Iraqi National Alliance is a coalition of largely Shia-Arab parties and is believed to be the successor to the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) which was the largest bloc in the previous parliament. The major parties in the INA are the same which formed the UIA with the exception of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Daawa. Its most significant members are the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), (formerly Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Badr Organization, the Sadrist Trend, the Islamic Virtue Party, the Iraqi National Congress and the National Reform Movement – all Shia.[59] The INA failed to win explicit endorsement from Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani who had publicly supported the UIA in the 2005 elections.

The most striking feature of the new alliance is the presence in its ranks of both the ISCI and the Sadrist Trend, given that the two groups have been locked in bitter rivalry since 2004 which, on a number of times, has erupted into the ugliest episodes of intra-Shia violence in post-Saddam Iraq. Though predominantly a power struggle, this rivalry has been underpinned by differences mainly over the nature of centre-provinces relations and the ties with the U.S. authorities in Iraq. The ISCI has been a vocal proponent of decentralized government in Iraq. It has even argued for uniting nine Shia provinces into a larger region enjoying an autonomous status akin to Kurdistan. Contrarily, the Sadrist Trend has been for a strong central government.[60] The ISCI has been the closest U.S. ally, whereas Sadr's vehement opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq has been behind much of the violence in post-Saddam Iraq. In addition to these differences, the two organizations represent vastly different Shia constituencies: The ISCI's support base is the mercantile middle-class, whereas the Sadarist Trend represents the urban Shia underclass. The tussle between the two, therefore, has also been dubbed a 'class struggle.'[61]

That despite such hostile relations and ideological differences, the two groups chose to close ranks warrants some comment. The idea of a revived Shia alliance with a more nationalist orientation was first propounded by Moqtada al-Sadr in mid-February 2009 when he proposed a full makeover of the UIA to be named the 'United National Iraqi Alliance'.[62] The idea was embraced by several other elements in the old UIA; and after

lengthy behind-the-scene-negotiations, aimed mainly at coopting Prime Minister Maliki, the formation of the Iraqi National Alliance was announced on August 24, 2009.[63]

Two factors seem to have pushed the Sadrist Trend and the ISCI to bury the hatchet, at least for the time being, and make an electoral alliance: pressure from Iran which wanted the Shia groups to join hands so that they would be able to remain in power, which Iran views as "the best guarantee for a stable, long-term bilateral relationship."[64] Secondly, the results of the January 2009 local elections in which Prime Minister Maliki's party emerged victorious, whereas the ISCI and the Sadrist Trend lost much of their sway. Weakened, the two parties opted to join hands to reclaim the lost political ground.[65] The fact that Maliki had campaigned on an agenda that focused on national identity instead of an ethno-sectarian identity, was not lost on the INA leaders who tried to reach out to other ethnic and sectarian groups in order to form a broad-based coalition. Their efforts, however, produced extremely limited results with only a small Sunni and a Kurdish-Shia group joining the alliance.[66]

Result as it did from political expediency rather than a genuine agreement among its constituent parties over key national issues, the INA leaders chose to keep their policy sufficiently vogue, declaring mainly uncontroversial "guiding principles" such as appeals for unity, support for the constitution and for peaceful coexistence among Iraq's peoples, and the patronage of culture and arts "in accordance with religious and moral values."[67] The fundamental differences between its two largest parties foreshadowed INA's inability to speak with a common voice in the post-election political negotiations among different blocs.

State of Law Coalition (SoL)

The SoL is the combination of more than 40 parties, representing different ethno-sectarian constituencies. Heavily dominated by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Movemnet (Shia), the coalition consists of, inter alia, the Anbar Salvation National Front (Sunni), the Independent Arab Movement (Sunni), the United Independent Iraqi Bloc (Kurds), the Gathering (Secular Shia) and the Independent (Sunni).[68] Though the coalition appears to be wide-ranging in terms of representation of different ethnic and sectarian groups, the non-Shia groups are mostly small political entities with limited influence, undermining its non-sectarian credentials. Nevertheless, in this regard, it is definitely more representative than the INA.

Announced on October 1, 2009 by Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to compete in the 2010 parliamentary elections, the SoL was seen as the culmination of Maliki's strategy to present himself as a national leader, having following among all ethno-sectarian constituencies rather than represent and be beholden to the Shia voters only. 'The birth of State of Law represents a historic milestone and development in establishing a modern Iraq built on peaceful, nationalist principles ... far from the politics of marginalisation, discrimination and tyranny,"[69] Maliki said while announcing the launch of the SoL.

Maliki had adopted this strategy in the campaign for provincial elections in January 2009, which widened the gulf between Daawa and its UIA-ally, the ISCI, resulting in two Shia groups contesting election on separate platforms, thereby ringing the death knell of

the UIA. Discarding sectarian rhetoric and instead raising nationalist slogans, Maliki had based his campaign on the twin planks of restoring stability to the country and providing basic services to the people.[70] Incidentally, Maliki government's track record buttressed his campaign significantly and election results saw his coalition emerging as the clear winner. It fared well in most of the Shia provinces in the south and gained effective control of Baghdad and Basra provinces, displacing the ISCI.[71]

The election results were seen by many as suggesting that "the public had turned its back on sectarianism and the parties espousing it; religion had ceased to be a primary factor driving domestic politics; and a new nationalism had started to take hold, reinforcing the old Iraqi identity that the U.S. invasion and the sectarian war had disarmed, disfranchised and nearly destroyed."[72] This encouraged Maliki to stay the course by holding on to the same strategy.

A cursory look at the SoL's programme and manifesto corroborates this observation. The manifesto highlights SoL's "strong national identity", seeks to "represent all Iraqis regardless of their religion, race and creed", and takes pride in not succumbing either "to terrorists and outlaws" or "to any external force or foreign neighbour". Besides, it reminds Iraqi people that it had "pushed and agreed for a timetable for the withdrawal of multi-national force from Iraq to restore Iraqi national sovereignty." The manifesto reiterates the coalition's strong disapproval of the quota system and corruption.[73]

In his decision to contest the election on a slate other the INA, Maliki is believed to have resisted pressure from Iran which is said to have tried to bring all Shia groups at one platform to prevent Shia votes from splitting. The U.S., on the other hand, is believed to have encouraged Maliki to distance himself from sectarian groupings and build his credentials as a nationalist leader.

Iraqi National Movement (INM)

The INM is a broad secular alliance of political parties opposed to Nuri al-Maliki. Formed in October 2009, the alliance is led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia. Allawi has succeeded in winning over many important Sunni groups and personalities, including Saleh al Mutaliq's Iraq Front for National Dialogue and Vice President Tariq al Hashmi's Renewal List.[74] The alliance was the major victim of the disqualifications crisis as some of its most important leaders were debarred from running for elections.

Iyad Allawi is a former Baathist who dissented and had to go in exile. Following the regime change in Iraq, he joined other exiles in forming Iraq's first post-Saddam government. He was appointed interim prime minister in 2004. He was responsible for sending troops in Sunni Falluja and Shia Najaf – a move which helped him build his nor-sectarian credentials. He took part in the 2005 elections, but performed poorly.[75]

The INM built its campaign around nationalistic and non-sectarian rhetoric, claiming, "We are a national political entity, committed to serving all Iraqis and we call on them to join us."[76] The alliance's leadership is highly critical of Iranian influence in the region, but supports improvement in relations with the Arab countries. Though personally Allawi has maintained good relations with the Kurds, the presence of hard-line Sunni

nationalists in the INM, who call the surrender "of even an inch of territory" in the border disputes with the Kurds a sacrilege;[77] will make it difficult for him to reach out to the Kurds.

Kurdistan Alliance

The Kurdistan Alliance is dominated by two major Kurd parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The Alliance also includes small Kurdish groups, but does not include Goran, a new Kurdish party that in July 2009 legislative elections in Iraqi Kurdistan, effectively challenged the two major parties' dominance over Kurdish politics, and the two Kurd Sunni Islamist groups. Goran is a splinter group of PUK which first appeared on the region's political radar during last year's regional elections contesting on a platform to fight government corruption, poor distribution of wealth, lack of basic services, and the leadership's inability to deliver Kirkuk and other disputed territories to Kurdish sovereignty.[78]

Kurdish politics has long been dominated by the two personalities, Jalal Talabani (PUK) and Masood Barazani (KDP). The two have had a history of enmity, involving several episodes of intra-Kurdish violence and the expulsion of PUK members from Erbil and KDP members from Suleimaniyah, their respective strongholds. However, since a 1997 cease-fire, the Kurdish region has effectively been divided into PUK-controlled and KDP-controlled areas. In the post-Saddam Iraq, the two have reconciled to put up a united front in Baghdad. They contested the 2005 elections jointly. For the 2010 elections too, the two joined hands and showed no inclination to erect multi-ethnic or multi-confessional electoral alliances.[79] The emergence of Goran will make it difficult for the Kurds to maintain a common position in Baghdad. If the two largest Kurdish groups want to maintain a common Kurdish stance in Baghdad vis-à-vis the central government, they will have to show some accommodation towards Goran in the regional affairs.

Election results

The IHEC announced the results of the elections on March 27, 2010, nearly three weeks after the voting day and after recounting votes in some areas in response to the request by Prime Minister Maliki. According to the results, the INM secured the highest number of seats which was 91, followed by SoL's 89. The INA came third with 70 seats, while the Kurdistan Alliance secured 43 seats.[80] The election results were certified by the Supreme Court on June 1, paving the way for negotiations to form the government.[81]

Provisional results of the 2010 parliamentary election

Alliances and parties	Votes	%	Seats	Increase/decrease
Iraqi National Movement (al-Iraqiyya)	2,849,612	24.72%	91	+54
State of Law Coalition	2,792,083	24.22%	89	+64
National Iraqi Alliance	2,092,066	18.15%	70	−35
Kurdistan Alliance	1,681,714	14.59%	43	−10
Movement for Change (Gorran)	476,478	4.13%	8	+8
Unity Alliance of Iraq	306,647	2.66%	4	+4
Iraqi Accord Front (al-Tawafuq)	298,226	2.59%	6	−38
Kurdistan Islamic Union	243,720	2.12%	4	−1
Islamic Group of Kurdistan	152,530	1.32%	2	+1
Minorities	61,153	-	8	+6
Total (turnout 62.4%)	11,526,412	100%	325	+50

Source: Majlis.org

The election results have significant repercussions for Iraq's future politics, its relations with the neighbours and for the U.S. policy towards Iraq. In the following lines, these are being discussed.

Overwhelming Sunni participation

Perhaps, the most striking aspect of the election results is the overwhelming participation of Sunni Arabs in the elections, resulting in the Sunni-backed INM winning the largest number of seats in parliament. The Sunnis had boycotted the January 2005 elections, but the decision caused them great harm. This boycott had resulted in a political set-up in which Sunnis' role was greatly diminished and "for the first time in the history of Iraq, the two major protagonists in the national dialogue over the power-share and the future identity of the country were the Shia and the Kurds."[82] Realizing the damage that the decision caused to their interests, they have been increasingly inclined to give politics a chance to get their grievances redressed. The Sunnis had participated in the October 2005 referendum on the constitution to reject it. In the December 2005 elections, their participation increased and the main Sunni party won 44 seats.

The Sunni Arabs, who constitute about 20 per cent of the Iraqi population, had enjoyed predominance in the modern Iraqi State from its inception to the removal of Saddam Hussain, far disproportionate with their population. The U.S.-forced regime change reversed their fortune as the political process that started in the post-Saddam Iraq meant they would have to lose their predominant position and be content with a far diminished role in the affairs of the State. The feeling of disempowerment being felt by the Sunnis was accentuated by the policies adopted by the occupation authorities. Two of them - debaathification and disbanding of the army - hurt Sunnis the most. In some Sunni areas, it has been claimed that, around 70 per cent of the workforce was banned from employment as the result of these two policies.[83] As a consequence of these

policies, the Sunnis were weaned away from the occupation and the political process that had been under way under its aegis.

However, for the March 7 elections, the Sunnis were determined to translate their "anger, pain and frustration into a historic victory."[84] The Sunnis' eagerness to participate in the political process was so robust that they did not allow the disqualifications crisis to detract them and they did not boycott the elections as was being feared. An important aspect of Sunnis' new political consciousness was the remarkable degree of consensus as to who would best safeguard the community's interests. This is significant because hitherto the Sunnis had been suffering from a leadership vacuum because unlike Shia they do not have a religious hierarchy. Besides, having been in power for so long they had not developed alternative channels of political mobilization. The Sunni participation is also a source of comfort for the U.S. which had been striving to pull the community into the political process.

Nevertheless, the Sunni participation and their winning the largest number of seats in parliament could be a complicating factor for the post-election process. Emboldened as they would be, they would be more assertive in their demands. If the new political arrangement fails to accommodate their interests, the community may have second thoughts about participating in the political process and revert to violence. The situation was summarized in the editorial comments of *The Financial Times*: "This is a moment for the re-empowerment for the Sunnis, dispossessed by the toppling of Saddam Hussain. But, unless they see themselves represented in the political system, they could turn from the ballot box back to the bomb."[85] In fact, Ayad Allawi has already threatened that if the two Shia alliances joined hands to keep him out of power, Iraq could relapse into sectarian violence.[86]

Implications for Iraqi Kurds

The election results could also have significant implications for the Kurds' position in Iraqi politics and for the internal Kurdish politics as well. With lesser representation in the parliament, the Kurds might not be able to hold on to the position of virtual king-makers that they have held in post-Saddam Iraq. Their diminished clout would undermine Kurdish position vis-à-vis the unresolved issues between Irbil and Baghdad, prominent among them being the dispute over the oil-rich Kirkuk and other territories claimed by both Arabs and Kurds, hydrocarbon laws, and the status of Kurdish *Peshmarga* forces.[87]

Kurds are the second largest ethnic group in Iraq, numbering 4 to 4.5 million and constituting 15-20 per cent of the Iraqi population. Imbued with "a high degree of communal identity"[88], Kurds have long been at odds with the Arab governments in Baghdad. In the three decades preceding the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Kurdish *Peshmarga* forces had been waging an intermittent insurgency, eliciting ruthless repression by Arab rulers, particularly Saddam Hussain. During the 1990s, however, the Kurds succeeded in setting up an autonomous administration in Kurdish territories, thanks to the U.S. and allied forces' enforced 'no fly zone' over the Kurdish areas which protected them from Iraqi forces. The period saw the U.S. and the Kurds coming increasingly closer to each other, with the latter also joining the Iraqi National Congress – a U.S.-backed Opposition group.[89] The camaraderie thus established has flourished in

the post-Saddam period making the Kurds the staunchest U.S. allies in Iraq – a relationship that allowed the Kurds to reap handsome political dividends.

In fact, Iraqi Kurds have been the greatest beneficiary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq which, to quote historian David McDowall, presented Kurds with the "greatest opportunity" since 1918 to further their cause.[90] And the Kurds appeared to have made the most of this opportunity. In the post-Saddam political set-up, the Kurds have remained extremely important players. Once a brutally oppressed ethnic minority, they have come to assume such important positions as the president and the foreign minister of the Republic. Out of 37 ministers in the previous cabinet, eight were Kurds. The Kurds also succeeded in incorporating many of their demands in the 2005 constitution.[91] The Kurds' ascendancy was in part due to their strong showing in the 2005 election which saw the Kurdish Alliance emerge as the second largest bloc in parliament after the UIA, thanks to the Sunni boycott of the elections.

Lately, however, the Kurds' influence seems to be waning. The results of March elections not only attest to this but also point to the emergence of new trends that can further curtail Kurdish influence in Iraq.

The first indicator of declining Kurdish influence is the reduced Kurdish presence in parliament. The March 2010 elections were second in a row that saw Kurdish representation in parliament plummeting. In the January 2005 elections, the Kurds had won 75 seats, whereas in the December 2005 elections, they could win only 53 seats.[92] The March 2010 elections have further eroded Kurdish representation with only 43 seats won by the Kurdistan Alliance. It is worth mentioning that in the first two elections, the total number of seats was 275 which were increased to 325 seats for the recent elections.

The Kurdish gains in the January and December 2005 elections were partly due to the Sunni boycott of these elections. As the Sunni Arabs came round to the idea of political participation instead of armed resistance, the Kurds lost ground to Sunnis in many areas. This is what constitutes the main reason of Kurds' reduced representation in parliament.

The Kurds' loss was particularly pronounced in Kirkuk which acquired all the more salience given the critical importance of the city for both the Kurds and the Arabs. Kirkuk, which sits atop massive oil reserves, perhaps enough "to build a Middle Eastern empire",[93] is disputed among the Kurds, the Arabs and the Turkmen. The Kurds claim Kirkuk as their ancestral homeland and want to include it into the largely autonomous Kurdistan region. The idea is rejected by the city's Arab and Turkmen residents and the central government in Baghdad. The Kurds secured dominance over the city in the wake of the demise of the Batthist regime in April 2003. They were successful also in inserting a clause in the constitution which set a December 31, 2007 deadline for a referendum in Kirkuk to determine whether its citizens wanted to join the KRG. The referendum has yet to be held. However, the March 7 election results were a serious setback for the Kurds as both the Kurds and the INM won six seats each in Kirkuk. The results in Kirkuk could weaken longstanding Kurdish claim over Kirkuk and may deepen the dispute between the Arabs and the Kurds over the oil-rich area.[94] It is worth mentioning that the

elections in Kirkuk had taken place according to the 2009 food ration cards, in accordance with the Kurds' demand.

The bitter rivalry between the Kurds and the Sunnis in general and in particular between the Kurds and the al-Hadaba – an important constituent of the INA which has effectively challenged Kurdish supremacy in Mosul – means that the possibilities of an alliance between the INA and the Kurdistan Alliance are minimal, making the joining of Shia parties the only option available to the Kurds. This limitation also could weaken Kurdish position vis-à-vis its Shia allies who, fully cognizant of Kurdish limitations, will not be too generous in terms of accommodating Kurdish demands, more so because the most pro-Kurdish element in Iraq – the ISCI – has also been greatly weakened. The strengthening nationalist/centralist trend in Iraq, evidenced by the success of Maliki, Allavi, and Sadr, will be another factor that would weaken the Kurdish position in Iraq.

The results will impact the intra-Kurdish balance of power as well. So far, the Kurds have been the most cohesive force in Iraq, with Kurdish politics under the duopoly of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). While PUK's Jalal Talabani became the President of Iraq, KDP's Masood Barzani was the President of KRG. However, with the emergence of Goran, Jalal Talabani's position is seriously weakened. Goran's success has come at the expense of the PUK of which it is a splinter group. The March 7 election results too have confirmed that trend. In intra-Kurdish affairs, Barzani will assume a dominant position.

Impact on balance of power within Shia politics

The strong showing of the Maliki and the Sadr factions in the elections vis-à-vis the ISCI and the Badr presage a dramatic change in the balance of power within Iraq's Shia political landscape, with attendant ramifications for Iraq's relations with its neighbours and with the U.S.

Far from being a monolith, the Shias in Iraq are divided in a number of political factions having divergent views on a variety of issues such as religion's place in politics, federalism, and Iraq's relations with regional States and the U.S. These factions have been involved in an internecine power struggle ever since the demise of the Saddam regime – Shias' nemesis. As the post-Saddam political process unfolded, paving the way to Shia empowerment, to which they were entitled thanks to their numerical preponderance, the power struggle among different Shia factions intensified, at times degenerating into violent confrontation.

The first signs of violent intra-Shia tussle emerged in Aril 2003 with the murder of a moderate cleric, Sheikh Abdal-Majid al-Khoi, allegedly by Moqtada Sadr's supporters. The differences between Khoi and Sadr were both policy and doctrinal. Khoi had expressed his support for the U.S.-led coalition's 'liberation' of Iraq from Saddam's tyrannical rule and was opposed to the Iran-style theocracy.[95] Sadr, on the other hand, was and has been an implacable enemy of the U.S. presence in Iraq and favours active rule by the clergy in politics. Sadr has had a history of adversarial relations also with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior and revered religious leader of Iraqi Shias. On the same day that Khoi was murdered, Sadr's supporters besieged Sistani's home in Najaf and demanded that he leave town or be killed.

Subsequently, Sadar continued with his strategy to use violence to further his political goals which led to full-fledged armed confrontations first between his militia and the U.S. forces and then between his militia and the Iraqi forces. Sadr's militia had also been involved in fierce fighting in their quest to control southern Iraq. However, by the end of May 2007, Iraqi forces with the help of U.S. forces had succeeded in crushing the rebellion by Moqtada's militia.[96] At that time it appeared as if the political career of Moqtada, who had gone to Iran for higher religious studies, had come to an end.

However, the March 7 election results have stunned those who were anxious to write his political obituary. The Sadarist movement has emerged as the largest group within the INA, securing 40 seats out of the total 70. This strong electoral performance will tip the balance within the INA in Sadr's favour as its main rival in the bloc, the ISCI, could win only eight seats.[97] Sadr will lay its claim to the dominant position within the bloc because the Sadrists believe there is a marked contradiction between a leadership heavily dominated by the weaker blocs (ISCI/Badr; Jaafari) and a numerically strong element that is poorly represented at the top (the Sadrists).[98] The other major winner among the Iraqi Shia politicians is incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki who too has emerged stronger. In the previous elections, he was the representative of a small party within the UIA, but now his own bloc has emerged as the second largest group in parliament securing 89 seats. However, Sadr's victory bodes ill for Maliki's aspirations to continue as the prime minister due to the strong rivalry between the two camps.

The ascendancy of Maliki and Sadar underscores the strong nationalist trend in Iraqi politics. It also shows that Iraq's majority Shia community had put its weight behind the forces resisting fragmentation which is an encouraging development from the standpoint of nation-building in Iraq.

Maliki's success seems to have come from his nationalist programme and good track record of his government. Sadr's success is usually attributed to his strong nationalist, anti-U.S. posture, a network of social services for the poor, a disciplined cadre and a careful electoral strategy. The ISCI seems to have suffered due to its overly pro-Iran and pro-U.S. policies. Its centrifugal tendencies too seem to have annoyed the Iraqi people. Besides, a leadership vacuum created by the death of its leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has been a major reason for the ISCI's downfall. The organization has not succeeded in regrouping after Hakim's death and failed to put effective candidates for the March 7 elections.[99]

Regional implications

The election results are likely to have profound implications for regional geo-politics, particularly vis-à-vis Iraq's relations with its neighbours – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Kuwait. Most of these neighbours, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, have been jostling for influence in the war-torn country by supporting one or the other of the Iraqi political factions. The neighbouring States' quest for allies in Iraq has been guided primarily by the sectarian identity of Iraqi political factions with Shia Iran siding with Shia groups and the Sunni Arab States courting Sunni or anti-Iran, secular Shias.

In the post-war period, Iran has enjoyed overwhelming influence in, and maintained close ties with, Iraq. It was the first country in the region which sent an official delegation to Baghdad for talks with the Iraqi Governing Council, in effect recognizing the U.S.-installed body.[100] This dramatic turn around in Iran-Iraq relations came about primarily because the ruling dispensation in post-Saddam Iraq has had close ties with the clerical establishment in Tehran in addition to having sectarian affinity with the latter. The SCIRI, hitherto the largest Shia party in Iraq, was formed "in 1982 under Iranian auspices, originally to act as the provincial government of Basra, in the event of that city being captured by Iranian troops during the Iran-Iraq war."[101] The Badr Brigade, SCIRI's military wing, was trained and equipped by Iran.[102]

Several of the senior leaders of Daawa lived in exile in Iran during the Saddam era. Iran maintained close relations with Moqtada Sadr as well, which became evident when the U.S. itself requested Iran's help to end the impasse between the U.S. occupation authorities in Baghdad and Sadr in April 2004.[103] Above all, it was the enormous Iranian influence in Iraq that forced the U.S. to hold bilateral talks with Iran over the situation in Iraq, reversing its previous policy of not engaging with Iran in direct talks. The first round of these talks was held on May 28, 2007, in Baghdad, between the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and the Iranian Ambassador, Kazemi Qomi.[104]

Parallel to the increase in the Iranian influence in Iraq, there has been a rapid growth in bilateral relations between the two neighbours. That Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Iran four times in less than three years, underscores the upward trajectory in Iran-Iraq relations during recent years. In January 2008, Iran's President Ahmadinejad visited Iraq, the first by an Iranian president since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. During these high-level visits, a number of agreements were signed which provided for cooperation in a wide range of areas such as cross-border migration, intelligence-sharing, infrastructure-building, insurance, customs, education, etc. Bilateral trade too has kept pace with the burgeoning relations and had crossed the $4 billion mark by January 2009.[105]

Iraq's relations with the Arab States, on the other hand, have been frosty, precisely due to the Iran factor. The Arab States have been highly critical of the Iranian influence in Iraq which, they feared, would dilute Iraq's Sunni Arab identity and alter the balance of power between the Shia and Sunni sects of Islam. The Sunni Arab States, particularly those with significant Shia populations, also feared that Iran-supported Shia empowerment in Iraq could incite their own Shia populations. They saw it as part of the Iranian strategy to build a sphere of influence throughout the region. The Arab concerns were encapsulated by Jordanian King Abdullah: "If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new 'crescent' of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge."[106] These apprehensions precluded the improvement in Iraq's relations with its Sunni Arab neighbours, most of whom have yet to send full ambassadors to Iraq, despite the repeated requests by the Iraqi government.[107]

The recent elections, however, seem to have brought some good news for Iraq's Arab neighbours as the parties deemed close to Iran (ISCI) lost considerable clout, whereas those believed to be enjoying Arab States' blessings (Iraqiya) emerged stronger. Iyad Allawi, the Iraqiya leader, has been critical of Iran for meddling in Iraq's

internal affairs, had campaigned for better relations with the Arab States and, in the run-up to the elections, had visited important Arab capitals, including Riyadh where he held discussions also with King Abdullah.[108] Allawi's success has raised hopes in the Arab countries that he would be able to curb Iran's influence in Iraq. The Arabs also hopes that under Allawi's stewardship, Iraq would return to the "Arab system"[109] by improving its ties with the Arab world as he is believed to be "capable of establishing balanced relations with all Arab countries and reversing Iraq's tendency to lean toward Iran."[110]

Though the formation of an alliance between two leading Shia coalitions – SOL and INA[111] – could deny Iraqiya the opportunity to form the government, and ensure the continuation of the Shia-dominated ruling setup in Baghdad, maintaining its influence in Iraq would be a formidable challenge for Iran; first because of the week position of the overly pro-Iran ISCI in the alliance and, second, because of the strengthening nationalist tendencies in Iraq so obviously manifest in the election results that would have made all political forces realize the dangers in playing second fiddle to Iran. In fact, the two most important leaders of the new governing alliance, Nuri al-Maliki and Moqtada Sadar, are both known for their nationalist credentials.

This new complexion of Iraq's political landscape would result in a readjustment of both the regional heavyweights' (Saudi Arabia and Iran) policies vis-à-vis Iraq. While Iran would have to reach out to a wider spectrum of Iraqi political opinion to maintain its influence in the country, the reassured Saudis will be watching the political developments in the country with far greater interest which may lead to increased Saudi involvement in Iraq's political affairs. The political developments in Iraq thus may influence Iran-Arab world relations in a negative way.

There are early signs pointing toward these trends. Showing a pragmatic realization of the emerging political realities in Iraq, Iran has called for Iraqi leaders to include Sunnis in the new government.[112] Iran has also hosted an Iraqiya delegation in the second week of April to hold discussions on the "future of the Iraqi-Iranian relations."[113] The allegations levelled by Prime Minister Maliki against neighbouring States for "meddling in his country's internal affairs to influence government building"[114] point to the possibility of increased involvement in Iraq's internal affairs in the coming days, if any of the sides felt his allies were being marginalized. This would mean Iraq's turning into a new Lebanon where different political factions would be supported by regional powers with opposing strategic agendas.

Implications for the US policy in Iraq

The holding of elections in a relatively peaceful manner with a respectable turnout should have provided the U.S. with an opportunity to heave a sigh of relief. The U.S. must be happy also with the fact that the leaders of the two largest blocs in parliament, Ayad Allawi and Nuri al-Maliki, have both maintained cordial relations with America. The overwhelming Sunni participation would be another factor that would please the U.S. as it has long been endeavouring to convince the Sunnis to give politics a chance. Even anti-U.S. Moqtada al-Sadr's ascendancy could be welcome news in that it indicates that the bloc has preferred ballots over bullets.

However, the real challenge for the U.S. is how the government formation process unfolds. If the Iraqi politicians fail in hammering out a peaceful political compromise and the situation degenerates into armed conflicts, it would mean the American efforts at nation-building and promoting democracy have completely failed. It would also make it difficult for the Obama Administration to keep its promise of withdrawing a major part of its troops from Iraq by August 31, 2010. This will be viewed negatively by the international as well as U.S. public opinion.

Conclusion

Starting with a flawed approach to democratize Iraq, the U.S. failed to correct its course even when the actual political developments exposed the flaws in the U.S. strategy. With an approach that was aimed primarily at preserving American and its allies' interest, the U.S. could not act an honest broker among various Iraqi contestants of power. This resulted in the political process, including the elections, failing in ushering in a stable democratic order in the country.

The developments post-March 7 elections highlight the fragility of the U.S.-initiated process. With the prospects of the formation of a cross-sectarian national government looking bleak, the elections have resulted in a situation where the country's relapse into a sectarian civil war looms on the horizon once again. With the induction of Shia, Sunni, and Kurd militia fighters into Iraq's security services during the last few years, a sectarian civil war could involve the security services too. Given the impending U.S. withdrawal of troops, such a situation could turn Iraq into another Lebanon involving regional players. Such a bleak situation after the U.S. made huge efforts and the Iraqis paid a heavy price with their lives to turn Iraq into a democracy, brings into question the very logic of bringing democracy into a foreign country through military means.

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