

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Election Planning ^[1]

Amman

Marc sat in the lobby of Amman's Grand Hyatt hotel drinking coffee and discussing Iraq's elections, planned for sometime in January. A Canadian with wire glasses and a quiet, businesslike manner he wore a gray polo shirt with a blue UN logo stitched over the heart, a souvenir of an earlier assignment.

We talked about CEPPS (pronounced "seeps"), the Consortium for Election and Political Party Strengthening, a program that will spend around \$50 million of USAID's money January's parliamentary election and two later rounds of voting that are supposed to give Iraq a fully elected and legitimate government by early 2006. CEEPS is an umbrella under which much of the actual work will be done by NGOs, including those run by the Democratic and Republican parties.

I was surprised by how positive he felt about elections, but as the conversation progressed I also realized we were coming at the planned vote from different directions. Marc's job is to help get people registered and organized, to help them understand what voting means, make sure the mechanisms are in place that will allow them to do so and to encourage Iraqis to build the local civil institutions that will make the vote meaningful. He seemed pretty confident. I was dubious, but have since noted an article in this morning's *New York Times*, not a paper I usually associate with over-optimistic assessments of the situation in Iraq, that paints a similarly positive picture of January's vote, at least from a technical perspective.

Then I asked Marc about security, an issue he had not mentioned. He said he didn't know. The Americans and the Iraqi security forces are in charge of that.

It is an interesting dichotomy. Most of the journalists and diplomats I know are extremely dubious about January. Many assume security will prevent any vote – or at least any vote with a shred of legitimacy – taking place. Perhaps because of this, few appear to have given much thought to whether the mechanics of the process are moving forward. But mechanics are what concerns Marc. And as he, and Friday's Times outlined, an impressive amount of progress has been made toward getting voter rolls in order.

Marc was eager to get back to Iraq (voter registration is supposed to begin on November 1), which he left only a few weeks ago at the end of a different contract. For now he is part of the rootless community of westerners, hundreds of whom are stuck in Amman at any given moment as they try to get into Iraq. Some are waiting for transportation and insurance issues to solve themselves, others for the security situation in their chosen destination to ease up. Still others are here on a quasi-permanent basis because funding for their projects moved forward at about the same time the home office concluded that actually going into Iraq was too dangerous. Members of this last group wait in Amman, communicate with Iraqi colleagues by phone and email and look into ways to bring Iraqis out to Jordan for training programs, and

generally make the best of a bad situation.

Our conversation was a reminder that, as bad as things are getting (and on many levels they just seem to get worse and worse) there are a lot of people out there who are trying to help Iraq get back on its feet. Few things in Iraq seem to be going as planned these days, but there are, at least, some people out there who are at least trying to make things better.

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