

Nov 04, 2016 by **Gordon Robison**

Differences of Perspective ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

There is a peculiar disconnect when you talk to Westerners here and in Baghdad about the upcoming Iraqi elections.

Aid workers, people with NGOs and, obviously, coalition officials doing election-related work all talk about the January 30 vote with a mix of efficiency and optimism: we are moving these resources in, making those plans, setting up this or that seminar. Dozens of Iraqi journalists have spent a few days or a week in Amman over the last few months on training courses where they have learned the mechanics of election coverage. It is somewhere between difficult and impossible to get any of these folks to think much beyond the vote itself. Pulling off the election is their current assignment. Period.

On the other side of the fence are western journalists watching the election from here, or passing through town on their way to Iraq to cover the vote. I have yet to meet a journalist who views the election with anything but skepticism. The theory runs something like this: realistically there will be little or no voting in many Sunni-dominated areas. In many cities it will be too violent to open polling places at all. Where polls do open the threat of violence will probably keep turnout to a minimum. Those brave enough to go to the polls will find their choices limited, since several of the main Sunni players in Iraqi politics are boycotting the election.

The American occupation authorities saddled Iraq with a party-list system that treats the entire country as a single constituency, so the inevitable result will be a National Assembly overwhelmingly dominated by Shiites and Kurds. Since many Sunnis see themselves as Iraq's natural ruling class (Shiites, in this view, are unworthy to rule a major Arab state while Kurds represent a threat to Iraq's "Arab identity") this will be a recipe for disaster. That disaster will probably be compounded when the Assembly begins to write a permanent constitution (its main job) as Shiites and Kurds lock in their ascendancy at the Sunnis expense. The fact that Sunni militants largely prevented Sunni citizens from voting won't matter. Things will simply get worse and worse. Civil war, if not inevitable now, will certainly be unavoidable by summer (one could argue that civil war has already begun, but that is a topic for another day).

And where do Iraqis come down on all this? It is difficult to generalize sitting here in Amman, but I have noticed that the people with whom I talk regularly are becoming more openly sectarian. When a colleague does something of which they do not approve they are more likely to attribute this to the person's religion. This is not a good sign.

Let me be clear: I am not saying the journalists are all sages and the election workers blinkered. I'm merely remarking on the dichotomy of their views. I'm also not offering any pat solutions of my own. Nearly 18 years in the Middle East have taught me the value of humility

when trying to predict the future. As has so often been the case in Iraq there are no good choices. Postponing the election, as some Sunni leaders are demanding, is of dubious value. If there were some real sense that with an extra month or two the Iraqi Army and National Guard would be up to protecting candidates and polling places it would make some sense. There's no evidence this is the case, and a postponement designed to assuage Sunni sensitivities runs the very substantial risk of radicalizing the Shiites and pushing the Kurds toward succession. Staggering the election over several days or weeks might have been a good idea (it would, for example, allow Iraqi security forces and foreign military units to concentrate in a smaller area on each of several election days), but it is probably too late both to make the necessary arrangements for moving troops around, and to explain the change to Iraqis in a way that won't arouse suspicions and make things even worse.

So all of us – aid workers, coalition officials, journalists and, most of all, Iraqis – stumble toward January 30 with a series of gigantic question marks (or, perhaps, the Sword of Damocles) hovering over us. I wish I could feel more positive about this, but mostly I'm getting scared.

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