

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Election Day, at a Distance ^[1]

Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy

A friend asked incredulously how I could spend Iraqi election day skiing in the Dolomites. I replied that since I could not be in Iraq (when I signed up with USC their insurance people were quite adamant about my not going to Iraq on their nickel) I might as well be here. But isn't the advantage of living in Amman the ability to catch people on their way in or out of the country, he said? Yes, I replied, but everyone who was going in did so a week or two ago and they won't be coming out until early February. In any case, we won't have results from today's vote for seven to ten days. Aside from turnout and security there's not a lot to be gleaned from a day spent watching the election coverage on television.

The other good reason to be here (aside from the scenery and, of course, the skiing) is that today's vote is important, but not nearly as important as what happens next. However violent today proves to be – and the early indications were predictably unsettling – the bombs and the mortars will not stop the voting, and they probably won't do much to change the outcome. Though he overstates the case, President Bush is right to say that the mere fact this vote is taking place is an accomplishment. But what the new Assembly does, and how it does it, will have a more lasting impact than the vote per se.

The 275 member assembly elected today has two jobs: it must choose a new interim government, and it must draft a new constitution. Both of these tasks are so crucial to Iraq's future that today's voting pales in comparison. If Iraq emerges from this election with a government that can begin to get a handle on security, bring the country's Sunni Muslim minority back into the political process and put together a constitution capable of winning genuine popular backing then those accomplishments will far outshine today's voting.

Some have questioned how any administration emerging from these deeply flawed elections can hope to have any real legitimacy. There is some truth in that charge, but it would be hard for any successor regime to have less legitimacy than Iyad Allawi's. However troubled this election it surely confers more of a mandate than being appointed by the United States (which immediately denied having done so – yet another blow to whatever credibility we may still have). If the election ousts Allawi that, too, will be a good thing. Good by example: showing clearly that elections really can change governments in the Middle East. Good in practice, because Allawi is turning into yet another bad, brutal Middle Eastern leader.

Regarding the constitution, the key thing to watch in the coming months will be how the winners engage the losers. Will they use their new legitimacy to bring the Sunni minority into the government and the process of drafting the constitution? More importantly, will they do this in a substantive manner? Will Sunni officials be real players, or bi-partisan window dressing, like the token Democrat in George W. Bush's cabinet? This will be a real test for everyone involved. Iraq's emerging political class has not, so far, distinguished itself by statesmanlike cooperation across party and sectarian lines. Politics in Iraq, as in the rest of

the Middle East, are still too often a zero sum game. In the run-up to the elections there have been both good signs (the Shia leadership's consistent rejection of efforts by Sunni militants to make Iraq's growing civil war openly sectarian) and bad (the issuing of a long list of self-serving demands by a major Sunni party, which proceeded to boycott the election when it did not get its way).

Good things all to ponder here in the clear mountain air. The funny thing about Iraq, though, is that you can never seem to get away from it. On the sports page of Friday's International Herald Tribune I ran across the story of Faisel Ghazi Faisel, who hopes next year to be the first Iraqi to compete in the Winter Olympics. His sport is skeleton, which involves going head-first down a bobsleigh track on a sled only slightly bigger than my laptop computer. He will spend today, election day, racing in his first international meet. "That will be my vote for a better Iraq." He told the reporter. "I'm pretty sure it's a good vote."

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