

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Better than expected - now what? ^[1]

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There can be no denying that Sunday's Iraqi elections went better than expected. I honestly did not think I'd be saying this, but the vote, whatever the final tally may prove to be, was something of which both Iraqis and Americans can be proud. Even the death of an estimated 36 people in election-related violence was, in the twisted logic of today's Iraq, a relief: the sad fact is that many Iraq-watchers, myself included, would not have been surprised by a body count ten times that size.

Flawed though it may have been, Sunday's vote was surely a significant moment in the history of the modern Middle East. Arab newspapers and television channels acknowledged this with extensive coverage. Also heartening was the fact that the Americans managed to remain largely out of sight throughout the process. This is a moment where the best thing we can do in public diplomacy terms is to keep as low a profile as possible. One reporter who phoned me on election day noted that the people working in Iraq for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (the Democratic party's international democracy-building NGO) have become harder and harder to find. He wanted to know if I had any useful phone numbers. I suspect NDI's going to ground is partly a security issue, but also partly reflects a feeling that their effectiveness is, to some extent, inversely related to their visibility.

Media coverage of Sunday's vote often contrasted it with the farcical 'elections' staged by Saddam Hussein. We need to be reminded that such 'elections' remain all too common in the Middle East. Egypt has a presidential election scheduled for later this year and the contrast with the weekend's events in Iraq is likely to be striking. I lived in Cairo for more than six years and in that time I never met a single well-educated Egyptian (government electoral flacks and actual MP's excepted) who would admit to having voted, ever. The country's elections were, and remain, such a farce that sophisticated people regard the question 'did you vote' as an insult to their intelligence. Jordan's elections are somewhat more significant, but among the country's elite the attitude toward voting is similar.

Votes like the one in Egypt will be bigger public diplomacy challenges for Washington. Support for democracy and opposition to tyranny is the Bush administration's new mantra, but are we willing to criticize electoral shortcomings in a key ally? For two generations few things have done more to damage America's reputation in the Arab World than the contrast between our rhetorical embrace of liberty and our practical embrace of repressive-but-friendly regimes. This does not mean that we have to abandon our support of old friends, but if we are not willing to be true to our own values in public, our word given in private will ultimately count for little.

In Iraq, it remains true that the really hard work lies ahead. As Kofi Annan noted, "It's the first step in a democratic process. It's the beginning, not the end." But surely this is a Good Thing – and that's a nice change of pace, because it has been a long time since Iraq gave us

anything to smile about, however briefly.

On that note, I'll close by updating the story of the young Iraqi who spent election day competing in skeleton in an effort to qualify for next year's winter Olympics (if he makes it he would be the first Iraqi ever to participate in the winter games). Faisel Ghazi Faisel placed 32nd of 37 racers in the competition held at Lake Placid, NY. He missed the cut for the race's second round (only the top 25 go through), but was reportedly jubilant at making his personal goal of getting down the track safely in under one minute. A nice footnote to election day.

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