

An Opportunity to Achieve National Reconciliation

Ghassan Atiyyah

The 2005 parliamentary elections and constitutional referendum were rushed and resulted in a highly polarized (ethnic and sectarian) parliament. Thus the elections were actually more of a referendum than elections of political parties with different programs. The majority of Iraqis voted or boycotted the elections according to their ethnic or sectarian affiliation creating roadblocks for reconciliation. It was imperative for national reconciliation to take place before the elections. The next provincial and parliamentary elections could correct those mistakes if certain measures were taken to guarantee their fairness and freedom. The main obstacles to such measures seem to be the winners of the 2005 elections. Namely the two main Kurdish parties (PUK and KDP) and the two main pro-Iranian Shi'a Islamist parties (ISCI and the Da'wa). Joining them in this coalition, to a lesser extent, is the Sunni Iraqi Islamic party.

Since the last round of elections, much is talked about national reconciliation in Iraq without much emphasis on elections as a means to achieve it. A new round of free and fair elections will be effective in building national reconciliation.

An agreement on the rules of the game among the competing entities, namely free and fair elections will become important in achieving power sharing and stability. It is widely believed that the Sunni majority provinces have a better chance of having free and fair elections. In contrast, the Shi'a majority provinces in the South are facing difficulties in organizing free and fair elections. For the average Iraqi, the predominant belief at the moment is that the elections will not bring change in leadership since ISCI and Da'wa will resort to any means in order to ensure victory and maintain the status-quo. This belief was reinforced when the Sadrists were defeated by the Iraqi Army in the Southern cities of Basra and Ammarah. In that sense, the elections are pivotal because if they are not held, Iraq will head toward a new chaotic situation. A new chaotic situation could be resulted as well if the elections are held and are greatly rigged and manipulated. OR, chaos could be avoided if free and fair elections are held with great emphasis on inclusion and wide participation by all segments of Iraqi society. If the Iraqis are convinced that the elections are free and fair, the justifications for supporting an armed insurgency will diminish if not vanish. The components of non-sectarian platform are beginning to take shape in Iraq. New parties and entities are emerging from within the previously polarized blocks (Shi'a and Sunni). The Reform Trend headed by former PM Jaa'fari and the Future Trend headed by a Sunni MP are a case in point, the former is an offshoot from the Shi'a Da'wa party and the latter is an offshoot from the Sunni Consensus (Tawafiq) front and both groups are inclusive of Shi'a and Sunni members and declare themselves as Iraqi nationalists rather than Islamists.

Additionally, the Awakening Councils are preparing to compete in the elections and the success of the elections will mean a better power-sharing arrangement among

the Sunnis. Success in the political integration of the Armed Awakening Councils could open the door for others to join it (including reformed Baa'thists).

It is a well known fact that the Arab Sunnis are better positioned to combat AQI and with the same token, Iraqi Shi'a are best suited to counter Iranian influence.

The elections are not only important because they will allow new and more representative leadership to emerge but also because they will determine the future shape of Iraq. According to the Constitution and the proposed provincial elections law, the provincial councils have a decisive role in determining the shape of future Iraq. The Southern provinces councils will decide whether the south will be (as ISCI would like) a mega federal region of all the Shi'a provinces or otherwise. The Southern provinces witness widespread discontent with the Shi'a Islamist leaders (namely ISCI and Da'wa), but they are fragmented and lack organization and leadership and out of frustration they might simply abstain from voting thus surrendering the councils to the big pro-Iranian Shi'a Islamist parties. But free and fair elections present an opportunity for the discontent elements to vote in favor of non-sectarian and nationalist Iraqi figures. The emergence of new Iraqi nationalist constituency will drastically change the political map in favor of stability and unity in Iraq. Also as important is the adoption of new political party law with clear restriction on foreign or use of state resources, as well as preventing use of religion or sectarian and racial propaganda could help in fair and free elections.

The next elections in Iraq provide us with a window of opportunity, which I hope will not be missed. The non-sectarian political forces that have interest in democratic change should be organized into a viable coalition capable of mobilizing and motivating Iraqis to take part in voting for change and stability. Otherwise, Iraq will be one example for "democracy" based on one man, one vote, and only one time.