



COMMENTARY

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Jafaari and Political Reality in Iraq: A Tipping Year At Best

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Bad as the present political uncertainties are in Iraq, they can only be the prelude to an even worse set of divisive debates and issues. The creation of a new government can only make the official opening of Pandora's box.

Whatever happens to Ibrahim Jafaari, it will not bring political unity to Iraq. Better leaders are clearly available. Jafaari was broadly recognized as a failure in his last government, not just for his politics but also for his inability to govern or to bring political progress. Jafaari's current survival is not a product of democracy, but rather the result of the fact Moqtada Sadr was bribed with 30 seats to stay in the Shi'ite coalition, and he could bully and threaten his way into forcing Jafaari on the Shi'ite coalition.

The problem now is the one leader with something approaching a proven track record, Adel Abdul Mahdi, may be excluded because Sadr will not accept him. This means that either the negotiations drag on or an unproven prime minister is chosen as a compromise popular with no one. Good leaders are hard to find in any nation, and compromises on an unproven figure depend on sheer luck for success.

It's nice to tout elections as progress, but the current political impasse in Iraq is a warning that democracy requires experienced leaders willing to compromise and give up power, political parties that stand for unity and not division, a political structure that can bring unity and progress, and governance and rule of law that protect all members of a political structure.

Regardless of what happens, an election that voted to divide the nation into Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurd has been followed by months of divisive ethnic and sectarian bargaining. The tensions in the Shi'ite camp threaten its unity and threaten to push part of the Shi'ites towards separatism and reprisals against the Sunnis, and other Shi'ites.

At best, it will be 30 more days before a new government is in place, and the old one has been a partial lame duck since the campaigning for the constitution in September. A new round of divisive fighting must still take place over control of the Finance, Oil, Defense, Interior and other ministries. A fight over the spoils for a host of lower-level positions also must be fought and won.

Once this happens, the Iraqi political calendar calls for a four-month debate over clarifying the constitution, which means divisive debates about "federalism" and separation of various provinces into federal entities, control of oil development and funds, national versus local authority, the level of Kurdish autonomy, taxes and state revenues, the role of religion in government and the law, control over the various aspects of the security structure, the status of militias, and virtually every other hot-button issue.

If this effort to revise the constitution does produce a compromise the Assembly accepts, a new referendum must follow 60 days later. Iraqis must vote on how to divide or unify after at least five more months of sectarian and ethnic tension and conflict, driven by a Sunni religious extremist insurgency seeking paralysis and civil war, Kurds seeking expanded control over Kirkuk and oil, and Shi'ites that mix their own extremism with militias and death squads.

This is a recipe for at least seven more months of constant debate and political division, power struggles and political jockeying, and raising issues the insurgency and hard-line Shi'ites and Kurdish nationalists can exploit.

If the process fails, the country divides further or moves toward civil war. If the process succeeds, no one can now predict on what basis a new structure of Iraqi government will emerge. Also, if a referendum does approve a revised constitution, it will take six more months to a year to put the process approved in the referendum in place.

None of this is necessarily a recipe for failure. Forging a new balance of power and political structure is never pretty, efficient, or without tension and the risk of failure. It is a warning, however, that democracy alone does not bring peace, progress, or effective government. It can simply mark a vote for division and paralysis.

It is the nature and quality of governance that counts, and it is all too clear that it will be well into 2007 at the earliest before Iraqis know what kind of government they are really going to have. Put simply, even when a new government finally does emerge, it will at best be the start of a bitter and divisive "tipping year." More realistically, it will take at least several years to fully define any workable national political compromise and the end result may well be a decade of occasional crises and instability.

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