

Postpone Iraq's Elections

By Anas Shallal | January 13, 2005

The elections in Iraq scheduled to take place this month need to be postponed. Elections are needed, but the timing is wrong, with the insurgency growing with every passing moment and Iraqis bracing themselves for the worst. Few Iraqis feel safe enough to cast a vote and fewer still know who the candidates are or what they stand for.

When I speak to relatives in Iraq, they seem far more concerned about the security of their families than the elections. They say the situation is quickly spiraling into chaos. Election officials are being killed, threatened, and kidnapped daily and the entire Electoral Commission in Anbar province west and north of the capital has resigned.

Some well-placed officials in the interim government are voicing doubts about the elections. Iraqi interim President Ghazi Al Yawer stated that "the January date for Iraqi elections is not sacred and the vote could be postponed if a lack of security threatens the fairness of balloting." Barham Salih, Iraq's deputy prime minister, added that the increased violence can derail the elections. Iraq's interim minister of defense, Hazim Shaalan, has added his voice to the chorus calling for a delay.

Numerous major parties have made it clear that they will boycott the elections for a variety of reasons. Last October, these political entities came together and recommended a six-month delay and demanded an immediate cease-fire by U.S. and Iraqi troops. Unfortunately, their demands were ignored. The attack on Fallujah came merely a week after these political parties called for the cease-fire in a declaration. Those attacks killed hundreds of Iraqis and left thousands homeless, creating a humanitarian disaster. That's hardly a recipe for winning hearts and minds.

The U.S. administration and the interim Iraqi government are adamant about holding elections on January 30. They claim that without an election, the legitimacy of the government is at stake and the security situation will continue to deteriorate.

Such thinking is what got the Bush administration into this mess in the first place. It is this type of intransigence and lack of foresight that has created an atmosphere of mistrust and doubt. Those who demand a delay are asking: What's the rush? Iraqis have waited over 50 years to have an election. Certainly they can wait six more months. Allowing for a six-month delay may not solve the security issues or help the candidates to get their message out, but it can sure go a long way in providing a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation among the competing political and religious factions. It will also save lives. Such a gesture on the part of the interim government can be a catalyst for healing.

On the other hand, sticking to this arbitrary date will only play into the hands of the insurgents and allow for further division and hatred. The date for elections was set over a year ago. Few believed that things would be this bad at this juncture. Many Iraqis hoped that the security situation will be manageable by now. The reality on the ground is far worse than what anyone would have predicted.

Brent Scowcroft, who served as President George H. W. Bush's national security adviser said: "The Iraqi elections, rather than turning out to be a promising turning point, have the great potential for deepening the conflict." As in every transition, there are major pivotal points. An election can be such a milestone. It would be unfortunate for us to squander this opportunity. Surely we cannot make everyone happy, but we can certainly make every attempt to dispel suspicions that will deem these elections illegitimate thus further alienating a major segment of Iraqi society.



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Everyone knows the election will bring on a Shiite majority. Not all communities have bought into the process, and if they stay out, the outcome won't be legitimate. What's the point of holding elections if many Iraqis are going to reject the outcome? They won't be democratic and will serve no purpose other than to further divide the Iraqi people.

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p. 2

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