

## **IRAQ'S ONLY ELECTION**

### **More Lipstick on the Pig?**

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**O**n Sunday January 30, at least [8 million](#) Iraqis, or 57 percent out of Iraq's 14 million registered voters, finally had an opportunity to go to the polls, to participate in a "free election" of sorts. They voted for candidates and parties that most of them had never heard of, marked ballots that a majority of them could not read, walked for miles to secret polling booths under the watchful eyes of a foreign occupation army that had "collaterally" killed or injured tens of thousands of their fellow citizens and brutalized many others, and defied the threat of attack from blood-thirsty anti-democratic insurgents.

About 243,000 of the Iraqis who voted were located outside the country. But the rest were willing to brave all these difficulties, including more than 260 actual attacks and 44 fatalities.

Clearly the Iraqi people deserve enormous credit for this brave effort – especially those who tried to vote in the more heavily Sunni Arab portion of the country where the insurgents have been most active.

Indeed, for once, this courage was something that most international leaders could agree on. In President Bush's [words](#), "The Iraqi people themselves made this election a resounding success." The UN's Kofi Annan described the Iraqi people as "[courageous](#)." Britain's Tony Blair reported that he was actually "[humbled](#)" by the displays of courage – no mean accomplishment in itself. Even Iran's Foreign Minister [Kamal Kharrazi](#), perhaps hoping that the election will [accelerate a US military withdrawal](#), called the elections a "success" and a "sign of nobility of the Iraqi people."

Moreover, the long-suffering Iraqi people also deserve credit for simply having survived more than three decades of costly wars, international embargoes, and a brutal dictatorship – aided, armed, and abetted for much of its lifespan by the very same foreign powers that were today taking credit for being the midwives of Iraq “democracy.”

The security forces who protected these voters also deserve a great deal of credit -- mainly unknown young Iraqi, American, and British soldiers. After all, without this protection, despite all the courage shown by Iraqi citizens, the fact is that there would have been no election on Sunday. The efforts of Coalition troops on the ground, in particular, go a long way toward repaying the debt that is owed to the Iraqi people for the Great Powers’ decades of complicity with Saddam, and their failure to take him out back in 1991, before he crushed the (abandoned) Shiite rebellion in the south.

Does anyone else deserve credit for this achievement? And, by the way, precisely what has been achieved – and at what cost?

### **ANY OTHER CREDITS FOR THIS PICTURE?**

In addition to the courageous Iraqi people and the troops, who else genuinely deserves credit for Sunday’s election? According to France’s Jacques Chirac, who had spearheaded opposition to the War at the UN, and has been of little assistance since then, the election was somehow “[a success for the international community.](#)”

If you listen to President Bush and his supporters, all this adds up to nothing less than another “mission accomplished,” a vindication of the Administration’s entire Iraqi strategy.

There was also no shortage of hyperbole and self-congratulation from journalists and pundits, especially from those who have supported the invasion from the get-go – marching up one rationale and down another.

- ✧ For example, The New York Times Magazine’s Michael Ignatieff [declared that](#) Sunday’s election in Iraq was “without precedent,” a bold experiment in democracy that everyone ought to “embrace.”
- ✧ Similarly, The Guardian’s David Aaronovitch, another long-time supporter of the invasion, wrote that, however we may feel about

how we arrived in Iraq and what it cost to get there, the only issue now is, "Are [you for or against democracy?](#)"

- ✧ FOX's flak-jacketed Jerry Rivers (Geraldo Rivera), surrounded by four heavily-armed US Army riflemen, [insisted that this time he really was reporting from where he said he was](#), and was careful not to give away any troop positions. But he did call the Iraqi election "right up there with "1776 (sic), voting in Selma in 1960 or whatever (sic), and the fall of the Berlin Wall."

Indeed, this newfound enthusiasm for "democracy" on the center-right is so thick that some [observers](#) have been reminded of The New York Times' upbeat assessment of South Vietnam's Presidential elections way back in September 1967. The headline read, "US Encouraged by Vietnam vote: Officials Cite 83% Turnout Despite Vietcong terror."

Evidently we are all Wilsonian democrats now – except perhaps when elections produce outcomes that we don't like. In the local elections in the [West Bank and Gaza](#) in December 2004, for example, an unprecedented 81 percent of registered Palestinians voted, and more than a third of them voted for Hamas.

Was this comparatively free election, held under Israeli guns in occupied territories, not a "resounding success?" Were the Palestinians who braved rival factions and the Israeli Army and came out to vote not "courageous?" Are we, after all, "for or against democracy?" .

## **THE HIGH COST OF MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY**

It is not surprising that so many partisan observers have stepped forward to take credit for the courage demonstrated this weekend by ordinary voters, soldiers, and police in Iraq. After two years of "terrorist dentistry," they have been starved for any good news.

Expectations have also been incredibly low. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson's remark about the singing dog, many people were not surprised that the Iraqi election had imperfections; they were amazed that there was **any** election at all.

The war's supporters are also down to their last official justification for preemptively invading another country that never attacked us. Having given up on justifying preemption by finding WMDs, and having made Iraq much more of a terrorist base camp than it ever was before, those who "embraced" the original invasion are leaping at the opportunity to

say – hey, look, maybe there will be at least *some* return on this incredibly costly experiment. Perhaps we really can sow democratic seeds in Middle Eastern deserts!

The investment has certainly been huge. It includes more than [1,606 Multilateral Force fatalities](#), [10,371 US wounded](#), another 1,000 MLF wounded, at least 5,000 fatalities among pro-Coalition Iraqi security forces, and anywhere from [15,563](#) to [100,000 or more](#) Iraqi civilian and insurgent fatalities, depending on who is counting.

The direct dollar cost of the war and its aftermath is fast approaching [\\$220 billion](#) for the US alone, plus whatever costs the Coalition and the Iraqi interim government have paid for out of their own pockets – and another [\\$9 billion of Iraqi money](#) that apparently disappeared under the Bremer administration. All told, this amounts to nearly \$30,000 per Iraqi voter, 15 times the country's per capita income.

Nor should all this spending be thought of as a purely financial cost, because there were “opportunity costs” – a fancy way of saying that the money could have been spent elsewhere and saved thousands – perhaps millions -- of lives. After all, it already amounts to eight times the annual level of all the development aid provided by all First World countries, and 100 times the amount requested by the WHO to fight the [global HIV/AIDS epidemic](#).

Of course, in practice, if President Bush had not been able to launch his pet project in Iraq, he might well have just enacted another tax cut. But for that much money, one might have hoped that Saddam and his corrupt loyalists could have been persuaded to leave the country and set up shop in Panama or Cuernavaca, following in the Shah's footsteps. Like the Shah, Saddam has now [contracted cancer](#), and may just have a couple of years to live. If only we had waited.....?

## **EMBRACING REALITY**

Under a microscope, most of the ex-post back-patting turns out to be simplistic, self-serving nonsense. Before we take off the flak jackets and break out the champagne, it is important to recall a few sobering realities.

### **1. Most Iraqis Want Us Gone**

Whether or not most First Worlders and the Bush Administration “embrace” Iraqi democracy, it is clear that most Iraqis have not

“embraced” occupation. Recent opinion polls show that the vast majority of them – not only the insurgents, but also those who voted on Sunday – would like nothing more than for the occupation to end.

Indeed, if they had had the chance to vote on the subject last Sunday, one suspects that the turnout might have increased to 90 percent, and that more than 80 percent would have voted to send all US and British troops packing, to replace them with a few thousand peacekeepers from neutral countries, and to immediately cease the construction of the “permanent” military bases that the Pentagon continues to build in Iraq even to this day.

## 2. We Could Have Held Better Elections Much Earlier

This Sunday’s election also came ***nearly two years*** after the US-led invasion. Largely because of the deteriorating security situation, it was almost certainly much less effective, efficient, and democratic than the election that we could have held within a few months of the invasion – using the same simple “ration card” and finger-printing system for voter registration that we ended up using anyway.

Back then, we could probably have achieved ***even higher turnout*** at much lower cost, with a much weaker insurgency -- as the Ayatollah Al-Sistani, Iraq’s chief Shiite cleric, advised Paul Bremer some 20 months ago.

Indeed, in other transitional situations, like South Africa’s transition from apartheid in 1994 and East Timor’s election in 2001, snap elections were held with only a few months of preparation, with great success – more than 90 percent turnout in both cases.

By deciding to postpone the election for almost two years, in a failed effort to “manage” the transition, control Iraqi’s political destiny, assert control over Iraq’s domestic policies, head off Shiite and Kurdish regionalism, and install a government that would be more sympathetic to US ambitions, the Bush Administration ended up inciting an insurgency that derived much of its “fire” from the occupation and the continuation of the unelected, “interim” government.

That insurgency, in turn, actually came very close to squelching this recent election. An all-out mobilization, involving an extra 12,000 US troops on top of the 140,000 already there, had to be mounted to prevent it. The US “control-oriented” strategy also served to

antagonize the overwhelming majority, making it more difficult to work with local allies and train Iraqi forces. Over time, it also served to exacerbate regional, religious, and ethnic divisions within Iraqi society, as groups like the Kurds grew more independent, and as most Sunni/Arab areas became war zones.

Far from serving democracy's cause, therefore, the Bush Administration's high-risk strategy actually played a game of "chicken." After two years of this, the election became such a close call that, as noted earlier, people were surprised and delighted that it could happen at all. But we really have only the Iraqi people and our troops on the ground to thank for it. As usual, the Bush Administration just skated by.

### 3. The Real Meaning of "High" Turnout

The "higher than expected" overall turnout in this election has been the main cause for celebration so far. But in fact many other developing countries have also held first-time elections and achieved even higher turnouts, even under occupation.

We have already mentioned the case of Palestine's 2004 elections. UN-supervised elections in Indonesian-occupied [East Timor](#) in August 2001 saw a **93 percent** turnout. [Kosovo's](#) 2001 legislative election, also supervised by UN peacekeepers, recorded a 65 percent turnout. In [Afghanistan's](#) October 2004 Presidential election, the turnout was 70 percent.

Of course in non-occupied developing democracies like [South Africa](#), [Indonesia](#) [the Philippines](#), [India](#), and [Brazil](#), 80-85 percent or higher turnouts are the order of the day.

The overall turnout figure Iraq also disguises some serious underlying problems in Iraq, because turnout rates varied sharply along religious, ethnic, and regional lines.

For example, among the Shiites, who constitute 60 percent of Iraq's population and live mainly in better-defended parts of Baghdad and the south, turnout reportedly averaged more than 80 percent. Among the 15 percent of the population that lives in Iraq's three Sunni/Kurdish provinces in the better-defended north, turnout was reportedly even higher.

Iraq's population statistics are subject to huge [uncertainties](#) – there has been no census since 1997, and in the case of the Kurdish areas, since 1987. But if we assume that these conventional population share estimates are roughly right, they already add up to more than 8 million votes in Sunday's election -- even if turnout in Iraqi's Sunni Arab-dominated provinces was **zero**.

In other words, the final voter turnout would have to have been substantially greater than 8 million for there to have been any room left over for Sunni Arab participation. This is consistent with many impressionistic reports that Sunni Arab participation was very low.

#### 4. Signs of Disunity?

Since the overall turnout rate was partly ***a product of these growing divisions***, it may or may not be a healthy sign.

In particular, Sunday's election employed a nation-wide [list proportional representation system](#) to select the 275-member National Assembly that will choose interim leaders and draft a new Iraqi constitution.

This system asked a great deal of many Iraqis who had never before voted. Almost half of them are under the age of 18, and adult literacy is just [39 percent](#). They were expected to choose among more than [111 different national parties](#) and 200 separate candidate lists, which, in turn, [contained](#) 7,000 candidates for the Assembly and another 12,000 for regional offices.

Most of these parties and candidates were virtually unknown to these voters. The ballot was so complex that even the Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, needed special instructions on how to fill it out. Because of the security situation, there were also severe constraints on how much campaigning could be done by all but the best-heeled parties – for example, interim Prime Minister [Iyad Allawi's Iraqi List](#) party, which was somehow rich enough to afford massive TV advertising and [\\$100 bills for embedded journalists](#). Most individual candidates chose not to be publicly identified – the leading United Iraqi Alliance party only identified 37 of its 225 candidates, “to keep them alive.”

This strange “peek-a-boo national list” system may have been the only one that was feasible, given the late date of the election and the precarious security situation. But it almost certainly increased the leverage of a handful of political gatekeepers like Al-Sistani (“Slate

169”) and Allawi. It also reinforced the incentives for block voting -- and the potential for regionalism and fratricide.

## 5. Another “Mission Accomplished?”

While Sunday’s election was an essential battle for democracy to win, it is premature to declare victory. Even apart from the insurgency, which is likely to continue as long as there are any US or UK troops in the country, Iraq remains a semi-artificial colonial construction that is subject to strong centrifugal forces. This election may have only succeeded in increasing these forces, by reinforcing group identities and regional polarities.

For example, to maximize their influence on the constitutional debate, and press [their not-so-secret ambition](#) to have an independent Kurdish state, the two leading Kurdish political parties established a united front, the [Kurdish Alliance List](#), for Sunday’s election. They also sponsored a referendum on “Kurdistan’s” independence side-by-side with the “Iraq” election.

One country’s liberation is another’s nightmare. Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdogan [recently expressed](#) grave concern over the Kurds’ designs on oil-rich Kirkuk, their continued interest in an independent state, and the refuge they have provided to some 5000 fighters from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters – “terrorists” in some vernaculars -- in northern Iraq. Two pro-PKK parties reportedly also participated in the Iraqi elections, despite Turkey’s [denunciation](#) of them as “terrorist.” There were also [complaints](#) from Kirkuk’s Turkomen community that 72,000 Iraqi Kurds had migrated there and registered to vote, to shift the balance of power.

Meanwhile, Iraq’s Shiites are also struggling to organize their political power. One reason why Shiite turnout was so high is that 75-year old Iran-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, issued an edict declaring it a religious duty for them to vote, and also permitted women to vote. Al-Sistani could not vote in the elections himself because he is an Iranian citizen. But together with fellow cleric Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, and accused [Iran spy/ bank fraudster](#) Ahmad Chalabi, al-Sistani helped to organize the [United Iraqi Alliance](#), which has reportedly captured at least 45 percent of the vote.

The UIA is a diverse lot, and it is by no means clear who will lead it or what policies it will support. But what is clear is that some of its leaders make strange bedfellows for the United States of America.

For example, Al-Hakim is the head of the [Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq](#) (SCIRI), one of two leading Shiite parties in Iraq, has been openly opposed the "US occupation." The second element of the [Alliance's program](#) demands: "...A timetable for the withdrawal of the multinational forces from Iraq."

In May 2003, two months after the US invasion, Al-Hakim returned from exile in Iran and set up shop in Najaf. SCIRI, which has been called the "[Hezbollah of Iraq](#)," also maintains the Badr Corps. This is an Iranian-trained militia that Al-Hakim helped to found in the early 1980s. SCIRI is [based in Teheran](#), and numbers anywhere from 10,000 to [30,000](#).

There is more. In the run-up to the war, SCIRI was one of six Iraqi exile organizations that shared at least [\\$92 million](#) in US military aid. (Another was Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress.) However, in April 2003 it earned Donald Rumsfeld's wrath, when [he warned Iran](#) about using Badr Corp, which had also developed strong relations with [the Kurd's PUK](#), to interfere in Iraq's internal affairs. The SCIRI is also [staunchly opposed](#) to the recognition of Israel until the "occupation of Palestine" has ended.

In October 2004, Iraq's national intelligence chief [Mohammed al-Shahwan](#) accused the Badr militia of assassinating 10 of his agents, and accused Chalabi, Al-Hakim's ally, of being a spy for Iran. Indeed, according to the [US 9/11 Commission](#), SCIRI, Hezbollah, and Hamas are all basically sister organizations that are heavily supported by Iran.

Of course this is the Middle East, so one has to take all such scuttlebutt with a grain of saffron. But perhaps now we understand why Iran's Foreign Minister called these elections a "success." Hamas' recent victory in Palestine was not his only cause for celebration.

You `re either for democracy or against it, right?

## **6. Seedbed for Democracy?**

Whatever the longer-term consequences of this election for Iraq, can we at least be assured that it has had a salutary effect on the rest of the Middle East? Here the answer is also murky.

Not surprisingly, Hamid Kharzai, "the mayor of Kabul," was enthusiastic about the election. Jordan's King Abdullah, a Sunni

monarch and a leading US aid recipient whose country doesn't yet hold Iraq-like elections, worried that the Sunni Arab turnout was "a lot lower than any of us hoped." But he also added that "This is a thing that will set a good tone for the Middle East, and I am optimistic."

Other weightier US allies in the Muslim world have found Iraq's example a bit less contagious.

Pakistan's President Musharraf has made no public comment on the elections. But in December 2004 he called the Iraq War a "mistake" that "made the world a more dangerous place." That same month he also broke his solemn promise to give up absolute power, extending his term as Army Chief and President several more years. (The US currently gives Pakistan more than \$300 million a year in military aid and \$306 million in economic aid, and has also recently also helped it reschedule billions of foreign debt.)

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak ventured the hope that the Iraqi election "would open the way for the restoration of calm and stability." But just last week, Mubarak, who gets \$2 billion a year of US economic and military aid, said he may run for a fifth 6-year term – unless his son runs. Just this weekend, as Iraq starting to hold elections, his government detained Egypt's main opposition leader.

You are either for democracy or you are against it, right?

## **SUMMARY**

So now that we're here, where are we? In particular, how do we make sense of this bizarre, contradictory outcome, where the overwhelming majority of Iraqis want us to leave their country yesterday, but could not retain their electoral freedoms for a one New York minute without us? Does no good deed go unpunished?

Was trying to force-feed democracy-to-go in this benighted environment ever a good idea? To what extent could we have done a better job of it? Will the astronomical price that we and the Iraqi people have paid, in terms of blood, distraction, international law, and treasure, be worth it? How long will it be until we can say for sure?

Whatever else this experiment has bought us, at least the Iraqi people have now held their first election since.....well, actually, until now, there never has been a truly- free election in "Iraq," the pseudo-

nation that Britain and the World War I Allies cobbled together out of three Ottoman Empire administrative *eyalets* (*provinces*), Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul in 1921, and started calling "independent" in 1932.

For that matter, the Great Powers of the day probably could have mandated an election way back then that was no less free and fair as Sunday's, and avoided this whole bloody sequel.



(Note to readers: **SubmergingMarkets™** has had the dubious satisfaction of having been roughly right about developments in Iraq for the past year and a half. For example, see [Reference 1](#) and [Reference 2](#).)

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