WHAT WE DON’T KNOW ABOUT IRAQ’S ELECTIONS [published in the Ithaca Journal, February 2005]

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Watching Iraqis vote last Sunday was exciting and inspiring. I join the majority of the world’s citizens who salute them and wish them well.

But I am also a teacher and a scholar who has written on politicized Islam, and it is my job to search for answers that will withstand the test of time. Are we able to judge accurately what is happening in Iraq during this electoral process? Here are my reasons for concern.

1. The electoral process has lacked transparency. We have no idea how the ballots were drawn up: Who was allowed to run and why? Surely the US occupying forces approved the list. And yet we know that over 60% of Iraqis do not approve the US occupying forces.

2. We do not know how the election campaign was funded. Who designed and paid for the TV ads of those candidates who somehow had them? We do not know how the electoral commission was constituted. There has been no official and independent oversight by foreign observers. We have been told that this lack of transparency was necessary because of the risk of violence and the need for security. But now that the election is over, these questions can and must be answered, if the process is to be accepted as legitimate.

3. We do not know what the individual candidates or voting blocs stand for. Reporting on the ballot simply identifies them as “Shiite,” “Suni” or “Kurd.” Yet millions of Iraqi voters do not fit these definitions: there are Sunis supporting Shiites, there are Suni Kurds, and there are many
Iraqis who resent being identified by religion or ethnicity at all. “We are Iraqis,” they insisted to foreign journalists. Why is national identity so underrepresented in the rhetoric of this election?

4. In October-November 2004, a national front of parties – the Iraqi National Foundation Council – condemned acts of terror against Iraqis and was ready to negotiate with the insurgents to end the violence in return for a) US troops withdrawing from cities for a month before the elections, b) the lifting of any restrictions on parties selecting candidates, and c) giving members of all competing parties a role in the electoral commission. It called for foreign supervision of the elections (UN, Arabic or Islamic). The INFC, a truly national front, included the influential Association of Muslim Scholars, enlightened Islamists (both Shiite and Sunni), pan-Arabists, independent socialists, and workers organizations. The US-installed provisional government rejected their proposal out of hand, thus ensuring that the violence would continue. Why? Why were groups that encouraged a split along ethnic or religious lines preferred to those who wanted a national coalition among these groups?

5. From reports so far, the big winners of this election are already in power, or were before the June “transfer of sovereignty” – in both cases, they are beholden to the United States. Did the vote in fact provide much-needed legitimacy for the status quo, even if that was not the voters’ intent?

6. In order to secure the country for the election, the US and Iraqi forces rounded up thousands of Iraqis on the mere suspicion that they supported the insurgents. We have a report that four were shot to death when a riot started in one of their places of detention. Who are these prisoners and why are they being held? Are they being interrogated? If so, what means are being used?
This last question gets to the heart of my uneasiness as an academic observer. I in no way support conspiracy theories, which is why I consider it so important that the above questions be addressed. Yet full answers are not likely to be forthcoming. A front-page article in the New York Times not too many weeks ago reported that the Bush administration is questioning whether “deception” (their word) of not only foreign populations but the American public as well, may be “necessary for reasons of national security.”

The US is now putting pressure on the government of Qatar to stop subsidizing the independent and highly influential Arabic news agency al-Jazeera, that was kicked out of Iraq last summer; its reporters have not been allowed inside the country since. The Bush regime hopes that the TV station will be bought by private backers in a position to modify its editorial policy, so that it is more sympathetic to Bush’s policies. How, when pro-US forces have a monopoly of the news reported from Iraq – when the US has admitted that “deception” may be necessary - are any of us to trust what we are being told?

It is true that the richest Iraqi oil fields (opened last year to foreign investors) are in the Kurdish area of the north and the Sistani-controlled, Shiite area of the south. It is also true that the “divide and conquer” strategy of preventing national unity was successfully deployed by European colonial powers in order to ensure their political control – in Rwanda, for example, where Tutsis were played off against Hutus, ultimately with disastrous, genocidal consequences. There should be no suspicion that behind the appearance of instituting Iraqi democracy, oil and colonial control are the real goals of the Bush Middle-Eastern policy. But with limited ability to know the facts, how are we to lay these suspicions to rest?

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