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Iraqi Elections, Political Parties, and Religion
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As the elections in Iraq draw closer, the hoped-for first, democratic step in that country is about to take place.

After decades of dictatorial rule, the Iraqi people will be able to take the reins of government into their own hands and determine their own future. At least, that is the hope of the United States government. But predicting the failure of the forthcoming elections has become a regular staple of the news talk shows, and government spokespeople are becoming more hard-pressed to talk up the elections' anticipated success.

While I cannot claim to predict whether the Iraqi elections will be held successfully, a comparison of the Iraqi elections with the American elections reveals important differences that indicate the Iraqi elections will have a different character from American ones.

Neither the Shiite nor the Sunni areas of Iraq, some 70 to 80 percent of the population, have mature political parties. The Sunnis had quite a sophisticated party during the Saddam years, the Baath Party, but the U.S. occupation forces outlawed it. Saddam mistrusted the Shiites, so he never allowed them to develop political representation. Only the Kurds in the northern part of Iraq, who had a limited autonomy after the Gulf War, have developed any political parties.

A comparison with the United States emphasizes the importance of political parties. They are the focus for differing views of the country, including the identification of its problems and proposals to fix them. Parties pick leaders to carry forward their policies and views. Those leaders then become the rallying point for party members and for non-members who agree with their solutions.

Furthermore, as we were reminded earlier this month, those leaders represent "moral values" that they will apply to problems and events yet to arise. Those leaders have the ability to reach across religious, economic, and social groups in their common interest. Finally, by bringing together people of similar political views, parties bring together many people to create the administrative organization necessary to govern.

In Iraq, without long-organized, well-known political parties, candidates will run as individuals. They will not have large groups of people around them

to help them develop a platform of common views and policy positions. Without parties, the number of candidates will increase. Instead of the two major candidates for most national positions in the United States, there may be a dozen or more for each position, as there were in the Afghanistan presidential elections. That will hinder the winner's ability to govern once elected.

Another difference between the Iraqi and the American elections lies in campaigning; there will be almost no campaigning in Iraq, at least in comparison to the U.S. system. Although we may say, after more than a year of campaigning here, that this would be an improvement, it is actually a hindrance. Advertising, campaigning, lobbying, rallies, will take place only rarely because of the poor security situation and the relative lack of media outlets. This means that all the individual candidates will have difficulty getting out their message, letting the voters know what they stand for, etc. There will be little party infrastructure to help the candidates to gain name recognition, let alone make their platforms and positions known.

In the absence of political parties and campaign communication, one kind of organization can step in and fill both voids, namely, the religious communities. Despite Saddam's distrust of religion and his oppression of their leaders and organizations, both the Shiite and the Sunni communities have remained intact over the decades. In fact, their leaders have been among few non-government, public figures in Iraq.

The organizations of each group will undoubtedly back certain candidates, if not put forward their own, and then use their network of mosques to get out information about those candidates, just as churches were used in the U.S. election. The difference is that in the United States, churches were just one source of information and support, while in the Iraqi elections; the mosques and religious organizations will be the predominant sources.