

Not to Save the day alone

As the US aims to save the day again in Iraq, the reality is further underlying issues are swept under the political rug



By Bashdar Pusho Ismaeel

All too frequently democracy and reconciliation in Iraq has been hampered with the reality of taking one step forward and two steps back. Throughout the past several years US meddling and intervention has played a crucial part in ensuring key political and constitutional breakthroughs as Iraqis struggled to overcome their historical differences.

However, whilst pressure and influence is nothing new, it does however mask the cracks that continue to undermine long-term Iraqi unity. For the US, who has expended billions, lost thousands of lives and tirelessly sought an elusive exit strategy, the perception of Iraqi concord, national stability and democratic progress has become an obsession.

This has meant that whilst the Iraqi political chambers have become accustomed to bickering, jostling and protraction, the US has often been racing from group to group to find compromise. However, the long-term strength of many of those agreements is certainly open to question – often real issues have been swept under the political rug, as opposed to the establishment of classic compromise and true harmony between embittered groups.

The US was yet again tirelessly jostling in the background these past weeks to resolve another potential political landmine ahead of the national elections. Not only was the election delayed by almost two months, and the election law grudgingly passed with US handing out promises and carrots on the side, but before Iraqis could breathe a sigh

of relief yet another row threatened to derail the elections.

Washington at stake

The Iraqi stakes for the US are clearly extortionate. While they can not indefinitely keep the same level of commitment and sacrifice in line with the past several years, they can ill afford to leave an Iraq on the brink either. The regional ramifications alone are too grave to even contemplate.

Security and political gains these past few years have not come easy and unless comprehensive national elections can be held on 7th March 2010, where all parties and sects keenly participate, there is every chance that Iraq may end up back at square one, along with the US goals of withdrawal by August of this year.

Baathist banning row

US knows a repeat of Sunni bitterness, boycotting and anger that blighted the last elections in 2005, will undo much of their hard work of the past five years aimed specifically at enticing Sunnis into the political fold and ensuring they receive a reasonable piece of the Iraq cake to appease sentiments.

Therefore, a decision to ban some 500 candidates from parliamentary elections by the Justice and Accountability commission, for suspected links with Saddam Hussein's former Baathist regime rang alarm bells in Washington.

A new raging debate just weeks after the US and UN were catching their breath from the last furor to save elections in Iraq, threatened to pit the Sunni population and the Shiite majority

just weeks from the elections with campaigning still not underway.

While the list of banned candidates was not exclusively Sunni based, with a large proportion of Shiites and some Kurds, it was drummed up and manipulated by certain parties as a direct attack to undermine Sunnis ahead of the elections.

External meddling evident

While Iraq has been technically sovereign for a long while, it is clearly hampered by regional jockeying and foreign interference. US meddling has been clear to see but with Iran throwing its weight as a regional superpower coupled with neighbors such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria who are more akin to support the Sunni sides, it becomes evident that such countries have become entrenched in the Iraqi machine directly and indirectly.

The Accountability and Justice commission itself is spearheaded by several prominent Shiite figures, with the one time US darling, Ahmad Chalabi, in particular with close ties to Tehran.

US political arm-twisting by both Vice President Joe Biden and US Ambassador Christopher Hill was heavily behind the decision by the Iraqi Appeals Court to overturn the ban on the candidates until after the elections.

Divisions within Iraq were discernible as uproar ensued in the Baghdad government, who deemed the overturning as "illegal and unconstitutional". As emergency parliamentary sessions were hastily arranged, clearly the goal was one of overriding the deci-

sion of the appeal courts. The US was rather predictably overjoyed with the decision of the appeals court, to a motion that they themselves had promoted. However, this motion itself was plagued with contradiction – specifically, what would be the affect if after the intended post-election review a candidate was removed against the wishes of the electorate?

Twist in the tale

If the current situation was not marred by enough controversy, this was further clouded by an announcement that affectively meant that all but 37 of appeal candidates had their cases disqualified as it was deemed that they did not submit their cases properly.

During the ongoing row, a lot of banned candidates were duly replaced by their parties whilst some had their bans lifted, which had left 177 cases in the appeal process. Skeptics would point to government manipulation of appeal processes to dilute the chances of banned candidates participating.

Bitter after taste

Regardless of moves to find compromise and allow a number of banned candidates to participate, this episode hardly leaves a sweet taste in the mouth ahead of a critical national milestone.

Key Sunni politicians and Shiite rivals of current premier Nouri al-Maliki have pointed to a ploy to undercut their support ahead of decisive balloting and mask inefficiencies and negative sentiment towards the current Baghdad government.

Baathism, an ideology of pan-Arab national-

ism, was not purely embraced by Saddam Hussein. It has popular weight in Sunni circles in the region and contrary to some belief its support is not exclusively Sunni based. Naturally many have pointed to Iran's Shiite hands in Iraq as the reason behind Maliki's stance with the apparent aim of stifling Sunni Arab renaissance.

Baghdad has in turn blamed many of the recent deadly bombings in Iraq squarely on ex-Baathists and their affiliates.

Keeping problems in perspective

As problems in Iraq typically get blown out of all proportion, typically it is easy to lose sight of the argument. The first de-Baathist commission was actually setup by the US provincial powers in 2003 and was later formerly superseded by the current legal entity. The idea was to formulate a new Iraq based on justice and democracy that would never allow previous perpetrators of the brutal regime a chance to return or hold power in any capacity.

On the surface, such a motion is deceptive for historical wounds to heal and for politicians to build a new national unity away from the dark chapters of the past. It is only right that having waited decades and thousands of mass graves later to expel evil that they would never allow a chance for such roots to regrow.

For some with proven links to the Saddam apparatus, they should not be allowed to participate in any shape or form. Cries of injustice by such individuals are ironic as they denied the same rights and freedoms to thousands of Iraqis.

However, the pro-

cess should be clear and transparent, not riddled with contention. For example, why did the relevant legal bodies wait for mere weeks before the election to ban such a number of candidates? Why weren't those candidates banned well before? The criteria for the banning and associated evidence to underpin such decisions should be undisputed.

Such publicity over this debacle threatens to turn this political charade into a sectarian showdown. With wounds just healing from the previous civil war, Iraqis can ill afford another two steps back.

As for the US, their pressure and influence should be all encompassing with the future of Iraq at heart. Whilst they can clearly jump start the Iraqi political vehicle at key times, why they haven't directly supported article 140 and other key constitutional articles waiting agreement and implementation is questionable.

Continuous feuding in the political chambers has merely masked the other fundamental milestones that have not been achieved - the settling of disputed territories with the Kurdistan Region, the advent of a national hydrocarbon law and cross-sectarian mix of the security forces including long-term integration of the Sunni "Awakening Council" militias.

Whatever government is installed next in Baghdad, without resolving these historical handicaps, Iraq will weave side to side but will struggle to move forward.

National P3

Allawi warns of civil war

The issue over the last few weeks of ex-Baath members' participating in elections created numerous problems prior to the Iraqi March elections—and it may remain so for Iraq's future political process.

Iraqi parliamentarian Ali Adeeb showed the danger of returning Baathists to the Iraqi political arena.

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Business P8

Erbil Security Exchange near establishment



National P4

President Barzani pleased with Washington visit

Baghdad does not support building dams

P5



A view of the Dukan Dam project north of Suleimaniya.

GLOBE PHOTO/HANDOUT, KRG Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources

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