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Iraq's Elections: A Win for Prime Minister Maliki and the United States

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Iraq's January 31 provincial elections were another important milestone on Iraq's long and difficult journey toward becoming a stable democracy.

According to preliminary results, the big electoral winner was Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. While 10 percent of the votes must still be counted, it is apparent that the relatively peaceful atmosphere on Election Day was a triumph for U.S. policy and a vindication of the Bush Administration's surge strategy. But it remains to be seen whether all the contending factions will peacefully accept the provincial election results and, more importantly, the results of national elections slated for December. The Obama Administration must be careful to maintain adequate U.S. troops in Iraq to safeguard the prospects for continued political progress.

A Vote for Security. Iraqi voters rewarded Prime Minister Maliki for his nationalist and non-sectarian platform, which transcended the Shia roots of his Dawa Party and gave him a decisive victory over rival Shia parties. Apparently pleased with his successful efforts to stabilize the country by cracking down on radical militias—some of which were aligned with Iran—voters gave Maliki a mandate for a strong central government. Maliki's State of Law coalition won a plurality of the vote in 9 provinces, including 38 percent in Baghdad and 37 percent in Basra, two of Iraq's most heavily populated provinces.

The results were a win for pragmatic nationalism over sectarian ideologies. In general, voters

avored nationalist leaders who ran on non-sectarian platforms and drifted away from parties that espoused Islamist platforms. The Iraq Islamic Party, a Sunni Arab movement, and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a Shia Arab movement—both of which emerged from the 2005 elections as the largest parties within their own sects—attracted significantly fewer voters this time around. Both parties suffered from the perception that they had accomplished little during their time in power. The ISCI was also perceived as being influenced too much by Iran.

Shifting Political Equilibrium. In addition to strengthening Prime Minister Maliki, the elections boosted Sunni Arab representation in provincial governments, an encouraging development for the bottom-up development of stable representative government. Sunnis had largely boycotted the 2005 elections, embittered by the loss of their political dominance under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and resentful of the rise of the Shia-Kurdish coalition that had displaced them.

The infusion of new Sunni-based political parties can play a positive role if they are incorporated into a more broadly based coalition government after

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national elections later this year. But there is also a potential for increased political friction. Some leaders of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement have charged that the Iraqi Islamic Party, which controlled the polling stations, rigged the elections to dilute their victory, and they have threatened violence unless the electoral results are reviewed.

Sunni political parties in northern Iraq are also likely to become more assertive in pushing back against the Kurdish political parties that have recently dominated provincial politics by default. The bitter dispute over the status of Kirkuk and other territories could also fuel growing political violence between Kurds and Arabs, unless it can be peacefully resolved.

The election results also revealed another cloud on the political horizon: The radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose militia was decisively defeated by Iraqi forces backed by U.S. troops last year, demonstrated that he retains substantial political support among Shiites. Although he was forced into exile in Iran, he retains the loyalty of his family's powerful patronage network and his allies did well in Baghdad and the predominantly Shia southern provinces. As it has in the past, the Sadrist movement may play a crucial role in Iraq's coalition politics in the future.

The Need for a Continued U.S. Security Role.

Iraq has made dramatic security gains in the past two years, thanks to the Bush Administration's surge strategy, which enabled and expanded an Iraqi surge against Iran-backed militias, Sunni insurgents, and al-Qaeda in Iraq. But Iraq's political progress is tentative and fragile. It remains to be seen whether Iraqi political parties have developed the maturity needed to accept being voted out of power without resorting to political violence. Moreover, the parties voted into power must demonstrate considerable adroitness to defuse lingering ethnic and sectarian tensions, build effective government institutions, deliver services to their constituents, and provide hope for a better future.

The provincial elections were the first of several important votes slated for Iraq this year. Iraqis also

go to the polls this summer for local elections, for a national referendum on the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, and for parliamentary elections in December that will be critical to the formation of the next national government. Iraq's shifting political equilibrium is potentially destabilizing and requires a strong U.S. military presence to assure adequate security. Iraqi security forces have made great strides and have become increasingly effective, but they remain dependent on U.S. training, logistical support, air support, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation.

U.S. troops also play a vital role in deterring Iran from undermining Iraqi progress. For instance, Tehran has given support and sanctuary to Shia Iraqi militias. Many of these militants, who fled to Iran last year to avoid a government crackdown, are now believed to be infiltrating back into Iraq. In order to contain and defeat this destabilizing influx, the Iraqi security forces are going to require strong American assistance.

President Obama described last month's elections as "an important step forward," but building a stable democracy requires a lot more than elections: It demands the development of a civil society conducive to power-sharing and respect for the rule of law. Further political progress requires a willingness to compromise, which is increasingly unlikely without a secure political environment that marginalizes extremists and promotes consensus politics.

The Obama Administration must not become complacent and imprudently withdraw all U.S. combat forces within 16 months, as Obama pledged to do during his run for the presidency. Such an early withdrawal could pull the rug out from under a young democratic government and increase the risk that Iraq will slide back into chaos. That is not change that Americans—or Iraqis—can believe in.

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