

The New Iraq

THE SISTANI FACTOR

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In order to understand what the recent elections in Iraq mean—both for that country and for the wider Arab and Islamic world—we must look beyond vote tallies and poll results. In southern Iraq, home to the country's Shi'ite majority, the elections took place against a backdrop of Shi'ite symbolism and religious feeling to which Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani—Iraq's most respected Shi'ite cleric—and his lieutenants appealed as they sought to turn out voters, especially Shi'ite women. Behind the images on posters and the words on leaflets, moreover, stood a context of Shi'ite experience and reflection that shaped the campaign period and the elections, and promises to remain an influential factor in Iraqi political life for years to come.

“Truly, women who go forth to the polling centers on election day are like Zaynab, who went forth to [the field of battle at] Karbala.” These words, attributed to Sistani, were emblazoned on campaign flyers and posters throughout the Shi'ite strongholds, along with a photograph of the wizened cleric. The Zaynab mentioned in them was the sister of the martyred third Shi'ite imam (or saint), Husayn.¹ Zaynab fought by her brother's side as he met the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid in what is now southern Iraq in 680 C.E. Along with many of his relatives and followers, Husayn—the man whom Shi'ite Muslims believe was the legitimate successor to Muhammad as earthly leader of the Islamic community—lost the battle and his life at Karbala. The city remains the site of his martyr's tomb and is a goal of worldwide Shi'ite pilgrimage, especially during the yearly feast of Ashura.²

By comparing Iraqi women to Zaynab, Sistani was exhorting them to defy the terrorists and take up the struggle on behalf of justice—a struggle

that the story of Husayn powerfully evokes among Shi'ites.³ It is also perhaps worth noting that Zaynab, the daughter of the first Shi'ite imam (Muhammad's son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was also the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs accepted by Sunni Islam), not only survived the Karbala bloodletting but went on to become a key leader of the Shi'ite community. By invoking her name and example, Sistani could appeal seamlessly and simultaneously to traditional piety, Shi'ite sacred history, and the idea of an active role for Muslim women as courageous leaders.

"Congratulations," the flyer goes on to say, "on your role [in the elections], through which you will be joining Zaynab in establishing and in granting victory to the Religion of God, His Messenger, and His Progeny." Voting is explicitly compared to the sacred act of promoting Islam, with the implication that any Muslim who votes and otherwise supports the elections thereby imitates and partakes in the virtues of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and his successors the imams. In this new narrative, not only is there no incompatibility between the faith and democracy, but the latter is now an integral part of the former.

Soon after Baghdad fell on 9 April 2003, Sistani issued a number of statements avowing that he would stay out of politics. But ever since then he has been active—albeit indirectly—at the center of Iraqi public life. Sistani subscribes to Shi'ism's Quietist tradition, whose roots go all the way back to the seventh century C.E. and which remains the dominant tradition in Shi'ism generally and among Iraqi Shi'ites in particular. Quietism is distinct from and even antithetical to the novel activist theory of "the rule of the supreme Islamic jurispudent" associated with the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamist regime in Iran. Quietist clerics neither hold office themselves nor endorse specific candidates. True to his tradition, Sistani appears to be free of any Khomeini-like ambition to become ruler, and does not seem to want to legislate the *shari'a* or to turn Iraq into an "Islamic republic" in the Iranian mold.

Quietism does not mean a complete lack of political involvement, however. Shi'ites often expect that their clerics will become politically assertive at moments of crisis or uncertainty, or when the public good (*maslaha* in Islamic legal terms) is at stake.⁴ Sistani's favored vehicle of political communication is the *fatwa* (edict concerning religious law).⁵ Sistani's *fatwas* focus on the removal of what he sees as a set of historic and political inequities under which Iraq's Shi'ite Muslims have too long been forced to suffer. Since Shi'ites form a clear majority of Iraqis, Sistani reasons, free elections should mean a government that genuinely represents Shi'ite interests. Significantly, Sistani has so far avoided offering any specific definition of those interests and shows no sign of planning to do so. The closest he has come is his unwavering declaration, first issued on 25 June 2003, that the forces occupying Iraq have no right to name the members of any constitution-drafting body. Instead, Sistani has

always insisted that such a body must be chosen democratically (preferably through direct elections) by the Iraqi people, who will also retain the right to ratify any draft constitution in a popular referendum.⁶

Lessons of a Failed Uprising

What underlies Sistani's insistence on direct elections is a history of Shi'ite disenfranchisement that stretches back to the beginnings of modern Iraq (the Kurds can tell a similar tale). In 1920, the Shi'ites staged an uprising, the biggest in proportion to population that Mesopotamia has ever seen. Their goal was to secure a majority government for the new State of Iraq that the British were then forming under a League of Nations mandate in what had been three provinces of the recently deceased Ottoman Empire. British authorities made concessions but then reneged, installing a Sunni prince from Arabia's Hashemite clan as King Faisal I (r. 1921–33).

With a few exceptions, Shi'ites were shut out of power almost continuously from the monarchy's inception until Saddam's fall nearly three-quarters of a century later.⁷ Sistani and most other Shi'ite leaders are all too keenly aware of the 1920 revolt's failure and the tragic history of exclusion and oppression to which it led. They have no wish to see that history repeated in any way. The memory of 1920, indeed, probably goes a long way toward explaining why the Shi'ites have shown such great restraint amid relentless terror attacks on their shrines, religious gatherings, and leaders. To the Iraqi Shi'ites, the ballot box and its promise of majority rule represent a golden opportunity finally and peacefully to throw off decades, even centuries, of oppression and second-class treatment.

This analysis raises many questions. One of the most important asks what Sistani's role so far and the Shi'ite tradition bode for democracy's future in Iraq. Since the liberation of Iraq more than two years ago, Sistani has had to fill a political vacuum that existed at least in part because Shi'ite leaders in exile had failed to create parties with political, social, and economic proposals broad and engaging enough to make such parties a real force with truly nationwide reach, or at least the potential to develop such a reach.

Sistani informally endorsed a largely Shi'ite coalition known as the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), but it has yet to show real independence from him or a posture on the issues capable of drawing numerous non-Shi'ite voters. Nevertheless, it may be that with time and experience the new Shi'ite political leaders now feeling their way through the difficult and bomb-riddled early days of the new Iraqi government will get a chance to develop broader national parties. Nor will these leaders always be as deferential on political matters as they now are to Sistani, who in any case will have his own reasons to step back from politics. He will feel pressure to do so from his fellow Shi'ite clerics, who have always valued their ability to stake out ground independent of the state.

Given the rising salience of religious awareness in the Arab-Muslim world since at least the 1970s, Shi'ite and other forms of Islam will in all likelihood continue to play a fairly prominent role in shaping how politicians campaign and how democracy is interpreted. This is not to say that there is only one "authentically Shi'ite" way of understanding democracy—on the contrary, the Shi'ite community is home to competing interpretations of democratic theory and practice that range from full-blown Islamism to outright secularism. Most Iraqi Shi'ites probably fall into a broad middle category that affirms Islam as *a*, but not *the*, source for legislation. While even relatively secular Shi'ite politicians may find it helpful to invoke great traditional figures and symbols such as Zaynab, over time (as Sistani must surely sense) a politician's need and a voter's inclination to rely on a cleric's blessing will be more likely to shrink than to grow. This will not necessarily be out of keeping with Shi'ite tradition itself, which in its older and still-predominant Quietist form stresses that vast and direct clerical influence on politics should be a special rather than normal state of affairs.

NOTES

1. The lives of the 12 imams (or saints) revered in the Shi'ite tradition stretch from Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. almost two-and-a-half centuries to 876 C.E. That is the year in which the twelfth imam, according to Shi'ite teaching, went into *ghaybat* (occultation or hiddenness). Most Iraqi Shi'ites belong to the group of Shi'ites (known as Twelvers) who honor the hidden imam as the Mahdi or the guided one and await his salvific reappearance. (Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to dub his militia "The Mahdi Army" was a self-conscious attempt to evoke and appropriate this article of Shi'ite faith.) On the history of Shi'ism, see Heinz Halm, *Shi'i Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996).

2. On the commemoration of Ashura, see Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 141–97.

3. See Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of "Ashura" in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

4. Two instances of Shi'ite clerical involvement are the Iranian Tobacco Protest of 1891–92, associated with Mirza Hasan Shirazi and aimed at ending a British monopoly in that crop, and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, in which the clerics Sayyid Mohammad Tabatabai and Sayyid Abdullah Behbehani played major roles. See Nikki Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891–1892* (London: Frank Cass, 1966); and Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

5. A collection of these opinions can be read in several languages at www.sistani.org, a website maintained by Sistani's aides.

6. For the Arabic text of Sistani's *fatwa*, see www.sistani.org/messages/qanon-ara.htm.

7. See Elie Kedourie, "Anti-Shiism in Iraq under the Monarchy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (April 1988): 249–53.