

# Will Iraq's election bring peace and democracy?

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BY Iraqi standard, the second general election since the US intervention held on March 8th ended peacefully. Voter turnout, though lower at 62% than 76% in the previous one, was significant. However, with the US committed to withdraw its combat troops of 50,000 by August and the rest by end of next year, the election was held to take Iraq into comfort zone politically and from security point of view, given the fact that in recent times Iraq has made significant strides on both counts. The US has not so far seen any negative elements in the elections and has reiterated its commitment to withdraw. However, analysts are expressing apprehensions.

The elections have been fought by a number of electoral alliances where the Shias who are 60% of the population have organized themselves effectively. The Shia parties have come together under the State of Law Coalition (SLC) led by incumbent Prime Minister Nur Kamal Al-Maliki. SLC is dominated by his historically militant Shia Dawaa party that broke off from the major Shia coalition the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) after the UIA had won the 2005 elections with 47% seats. The SLC has brought into the alliance smaller Shia and Sunni parties to give it secular credentials; to overtly distance it from Iran; and to gain acceptance among neighbours as an Iraqi national party. The second major coalition is the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) comprising Shia parties known for their anti-American; pro-Iran and militant views with leaders like Moqtada al-Sadr and Amar al Hakimi, leader of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, among its ranks. It had fought the 2005 elections as the United Iraqi Alliance and had won 47% of

the votes but disintegrated before it could assume power. A third major coalition is the Iraqia led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi that includes both Shia and Sunni parties with secular credentials that had contested the 2005 elections under Iraqi List and Iraqi Consensus and had won a quarter of the seats. The major Sunni coalition is the Iraqi Accord which is the remnant of the 2005 Iraqi Accord Front that had polled 16% of the seats. The Kurds have come together mainly under Kurdistan Alliance led by Jalal Talabani, Iraq's President.

Final results to be announced by the High Electoral Commission would not be known till the end of March. However, the presence of a good number of coalitions that lack cohesion suggests that there would be a lot of horse trading among themselves and parties before a government is in place. Last time, it took 5 months and the period was marked by serious violence and conflict. Many analysts are predicting something similar this time also. Under the Iraqi constitution, the leader of the coalition that wins the majority will be the next Prime Minister. However, going by the 2005 elections, smaller parties in the coalitions could switch between coalitions specially when there could be lures of political offices and other perks of power, making the outcome in choosing a Prime Minister a lengthy process. Nevertheless, the fight for Premiership is going to be between Maliki and a former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi going by indications at this stage. Maliki, following three massive terrorist attacks in Baghdad in August, October and December last year, seemed out of the race but has rallied strongly using his office and those of his Ministers who are all members of SLC, to distribute favours. At the time of writing this piece, ALC leads

comfortably across southern Iraq, oil rich Basra and Baghdad. Allawi's coalition is winning the votes in predominantly Sunni Al-Anbar province and Kirkuk, inhabited by Arabs and Kurds. The militant Shiite INA appears early losers; losing even in predominantly Shia dominated Najaf and Babil to the SLC.

The United States would be leaving Iraq to its fate but not before spending a humungous sum of money and sacrificing the lives of over 4000 of men and women in uniform. If the lives of Iraqi men, women and children who have died in violence are taken into consideration, that number would be in hundreds of thousands. Additionally, US efforts in Vietnam War had cost it 686 billion in inflation adjusted US dollars. By April of last year, the US had spent US\$ 696 billion in Iraq. The US would thus be hoping that its efforts in Iraq would not meet the same fate as in Vietnam that ended in conceding victory to the enemy, the Viet Cong. In Iraq the US would be leaving with the satisfaction that it has ended the tenure of Saddam Hussein and would not be leaving the country in the hands of the enemy. Unfortunately, it would not have the same feeling in terms of the country coming together under a government on which it could have total confidence for achieving peace and democracy.

Iraq remains as factionalized today as it was when the US invaded it to destroy WMDs that it never had, forcing the US to change its reason for the invasion to establishing democracy. Although violence has de-escalated, the conditions for re-escalation still remains and there is no guarantee that the country would not recede back into the same conditions that had existed before the US invasion; conditions such as ethnic/religious/regional divides that have encouraged dictator-



PHOTO: AFP

ships of which the one of Saddam Hussein was the worst. The latest elections may have in fact reinforced these divides. Iraq could be the proverbial dog's tail; straight as long as the US troops remain but become crooked again once they leave.

Iraq is, to use a cliché, at a historical cross road. If the incumbent Prime Minister returns with his coalition in which he has been able to bring representation of the other ethnic/religious groups, however small, on a non-secular platform, he would have the advantage of experience and control over the security

forces that his administration and the US have painstakingly put together and trained. However, that good news could be bad news for peace in Iraq because SLC's gains would be at the expense of the INA that could encourage them towards violence to recoup their electoral losses. Nevertheless, the best chances of achieving peace and democracy in Iraq lie with the SLC. If the Iraqia coalition wins the majority and Allawi becomes the Prime Minister, the Saudis would be pleased as they are unhappy with Maliki by the way he cornered Sunnis while in power. The

Iranians, who have a big stake in Iraq, would in contrast be unhappy because they back Maliki ahead of Allawi as they dislike Allawi's secular credentials and alignment with Sunnis, in the event their favourite INA is out of contention. Everything is complicated at the moment. The elections could push Iraq towards more uncertain times, much to the discomfort of the US and its commitment to withdraw.

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## India's missile shield test fails

India's home-grown interceptor defence shield developed to detect and destroy incoming ballistic missiles failed during a test on Monday, military officials said.

The test was abandoned when the radars following the target, a nuclear-capable missile, lost track of it after it blasted off from a site 200 kilometres (120 miles) from Bhubaneswar in Eastern India. "The 'hostile' missile went off the radars after it took off and deviated from its trajectory and so the interceptor was not launched," an official from

Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) said, asking not to be named.

DRDO spokesman Ravi Gupta in New Delhi confirmed the seven-metre (23-foot) interceptor missile was not launched during Monday's botched test.

India would join Israel, Russia and the United States in developing and possessing such technology if it is rolled out per schedule this year. The system's tracking and fire control radars have been developed by the DRDO jointly with

Israel and France.

Last month, India announced it would test a nuclear-capable missile with a range of over 5,000 kilometres within a year. India's current longest-range nuclear-capable missile, Agni-III, can travel 3,500 kilometres.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan, with which India has fought three wars since their independence six decades ago, has said India's missile programme could trigger a new arms race in the region.

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## Nuclear weapons deal with US is near

President Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, believe Washington and Moscow are close to reaching an agreement on a new nuclear disarmament treaty, the Kremlin said March 13.

The US and Russian negotiators have been meeting in Geneva to discuss a successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), a landmark Cold War-era nuclear arms pact that expired in December.

In a telephone conversation March 13, both presidents "expressed satisfaction with the highly advanced state of preparations" for the accord, the Kremlin said in a statement. During their talks, "it was stressed that it is already possible to set firm dates to submit the draft agreement to the heads of state for their signature," it said, without giving a specific timeframe.

Medvedev and Obama "agreed to give additional

instructions to the delegations" with a view to finalizing a deal, it said.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is to discuss START with her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, when she visits Moscow on March 18 and 19.

START led to huge reductions in the US and Russian nuclear arsenals, and imposed verification measures to build trust between the Cold War foes.

The broad outlines of a replacement treaty have been clear since July, when Obama and Medvedev agreed to slash the number of warheads on either side to between 1,500 and 1,675.

The United States said it currently has some 2,200 nuclear warheads, while Russia is believed to have about 3,000. But the talks have been complicated by disagreements over a range of issues, including US plans for a missile defence system in Eastern

Europe.

The New York Times reported that Obama had been "frustrated" after a February phone call with Medvedev, who told him Moscow wanted to reopen issues that Washington had thought settled, including the missile shield. Russia's foreign ministry later denied that disagreements over the missile defence system were holding up the negotiations.

Agreeing to a replacement for the treaty has been a foreign-policy priority for the Obama administration, and a deal would help bolster the president's stated goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

But a White House spokesman hinted this week that US negotiators would not rush the START talks just to get a new deal signed before April, when Obama hosts a nuclear non-proliferation summit in Washington.

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## Iran: The Western concern

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

EARLY this month the Vienna chapter of the Non-Aligned Movement, in a veiled criticism of the Western powers and Israel, along with a reaffirmation from the new Director General of IAEA, stated that it is the basic and inalienable right of all states to develop atomic energy for peaceful purposes. The NAM also reiterated their support for nuclear free zone in the Middle East; declared "any attack or threat of attack against peaceful nuclear activities, operational or under construction" as a serious danger to human beings and environment and a violation of international law; expressed concern and sought clarification from the DG of IAEA of "the possible implication of the departure from standard verification language in the summary of the report of the DG; and more or less expressed happiness over access given by Iran for inspection of its nuclear facilities. It concluded that diplomacy and dialogue are the only way for long term solution of Iran nuclear issue.

On the other hand a German television station reported a remark by Major General Atollah Salehi, current Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian army, that Israel would be destroyed in a matter of days. This remark coupled with President Ahmadinejad's intention to wipe off Israel from the face of the earth has strengthened the US determination of denying Iran the opportunity of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Why is the US so concerned? According to the analysts US-Iran relations are inextricably linked to the energy interests and tortured past, resulting in Jimmy Carter's defeat for re-election to the US Presidency.

Over 20 percent of the world's oil supply is transported daily through the Strait of Hormuz. If already tense relations were to escalate between the US and Iran, Iran could retaliate by attempting to close or disrupt traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. This, in turn, may result in an armed confrontation between the US and Iran, which undoubtedly would involve the Middle East region as a whole. Another reason given is to safeguard the security of Israel. But given the fact that Israel already possesses more than two hundred nuclear weapons as opposed to none by the Arabs, the argument on Israeli security becomes untenable. Iranians are no exception in seeing the unchallenged possession of nuclear weapons by Israel as a hypocritical insult to the integrity of the international non-proliferation regime. But Iran has to consider that during the process of acquisition of large number of weapons US and/or Israel may launch a pre-emptive attack on Iranian nuclear installations.

The reasons for the US' almost incestuous relations with Israel has been questioned by Harvard and Chicago University Professors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's thesis, explicating the disproportionate Israeli influence on US policy makers. This became evident recently by Bush administration's Under Secretary of State John Bolton's declaration: "we can not let Iran, a leading sponsor of terrorism, acquire nuclear weapons". This opens up the possibility of Osirak option (Israeli pre-emptive attack on Iraqi suspected nuclear installations in 1981) seriously.

Cooler heads in the US, not to mention those in Europe, strongly advise against such pre-emptive actions on the grounds that: (a) logic of pre-emption would necessitate the US to wage war against 12 nations with nuclear weapons program that Pentagon says are extant and emerging threats, (b) pre-emptive strikes may not be able to take out all nuclear installations as these are located in inaccessible areas out of public eyes; (c) Iran-Al Qaida links need further investigation, particularly after Iraq fiasco, along with the alleged Iranian involvement in the 9/11 tragedy; and (d) another Iraq-like misadventure will most certainly inflame anti-American sentiments globally, particularly in the Islamic world.

A British newspaper recently reported on Israeli-US joint exercise off the coast of Israel in countering simulated ballistic, medium and short range missile and rocket attacks on Israel by Iran, doubling stockpiling of US weapons in Israel, and Pentagon's pressure on Boeing to bring forward the development and testing of Massive Ordnance Penetrator and Massive Ordnance Air Blast to June this year. If used these could have apocalyptic environmental effects not only on Middle Eastern countries but on Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Central Asian countries. It is difficult to imagine

the Obama administration, free from the influence of neo-cons and new sovereignists, would allow such a thing to pass. Iran's desire to have nuclear weapons, despite its claim to the contrary, appears threatening to the West partly because of tension within the Islamic world itself that threatens the peace and security in the Muslim world and beyond.

Many Middle Eastern countries are suffering from tension between mainly two strands of domestic political forces, one aspiring for the Western model of governance based on democratic values and the other forsaking modernity in order to return to its sacred past based on purist interpretation of Islamic values. The events of 9/11 were a turning point in the Western attitude towards Muslims in general and theocratic countries in particular.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Seymour Hersh in an article in The New Yorker (04.08.06) revealed that the Bush administration was seriously considering a military option for Iran. One military planner told Hersh that contrary to popular belief President Bush was more focused on Iran than he was on Saddam Hussein because the real issue was who was going to control the Middle East and its oil for the next ten years. The White House believed that the only way to solve the problem was regime change through war.

The Iranian nuclear issue is complex and seemingly intractable. Iranian hardliners believe in the inevitability of a conflict with the US and therefore the survival of the regime. Its ideals demand acquisition of nuclear weapons which, they argue, if Saddam Hussein had then the Americans would not have dared to invade Iraq, and has so far suc-

cessfully prevented US military strike on North Korea. Brussels based International Crisis Group suggested that if "zero enrichment option" i.e. Iran's indefinite relinquishment of its right to enrich uranium in return for guaranteed supply from an off shore source as suggested by the Russians did not materialize, then Iran may be induced to accept "delayed limited enrichment" plan by which the West would explicitly accept not only Iran's right to produce peaceful nuclear energy but also its "right to enrich domestically". In return Iran would agree to a several years delay in the commencement of its enrichment program, limit its size and scope, and accept a highly intrusive inspection regime.

Should Iran refuse to accept both the options, Russia and China could be encouraged to join the West and support actions by the UNSC and the establishment of an escalating sanction regime. An amicable solution to the Iranian nuclear issue has to be found. A European group of profoundly influential people is against allowing Iran to develop enrichment and reprocessing capabilities (nuclear fuel cycle) even under international inspection (nuclear fuel cycle), therefore, the Western insistence on Iran to abandon its nuclear program is due to West's lack of trust in the Iranian regime. That Iran so far has not done anything illegal is a moot question. The West, particularly the US, sees a plausible threat in Iran's alleged aberrant behavior on nuclear issue. The international community hopefully will find a fusion of seemingly disparate positions of Iran and the West.

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