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The Journal News

January 29, 2005 Saturday

SECTION: OPINION; Pg. 6B

LENGTH: 760 words

HEADLINE: COMMUNITY VIEW

BODY:

Religion and politics in post-war Iraq

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The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 reopened long-standing religious divisions within Iraq between the Shiite Muslim majority, which had suffered brutal repression under the old regime, and the Sunni Muslim minority, which had been politically and socially dominant. Many, though by no means all, Sunni Muslims both supported and benefited from Saddam Hussein's authoritarian rule, and today they constitute the backbone of the ongoing resistance to the country's U.S.-led occupation.

Now, on the eve of Iraq's first national elections, this unintended, though not surprising, consequence of the Bush administration's "war on terror" has emerged as one of the principal frames of politics in the new Iraq. In fact, amid threats of election boycotts in the so-called Sunni Triangle, the Shiite majority seems to be poised for a momentous electoral victory. Is this an outcome that Americans - regardless of whether they favored or opposed the invasion in the first place - should fear or cheer?

Before we can answer that question, we need to move beyond the cliches and caricatures that frequently cloud our understanding of the role of religion in the politics of the Islamic world. First, we must abandon all notions that in Iraq we are caught up in a local example of an alleged "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West. In Iraq we are clearly witnessing a local example of perhaps the most durable division between the traditionally dominant Sunnis and the perennially subordinate Shiites within Islam, which dates back to the seventh century. This confrontation more clearly resembles the conflict between Protestants and Catholics in early modern Europe than a global confrontation between East and West.

Second, we need to recognize that after years and decades of oppression, the Shiite/Sunni division is not exclusively religious. In fact, because the Shiite population has suffered grievously from political exclusion and social deprivation, the religious labels have become the effective markers of deep and durable political and social inequalities.

Most people may not even understand the theological differences, but they will have personally experienced the social and political inequalities.

To the extent that religious identities coincide with historically significant social and political inequalities and even geographic segregation - the Sunni-dominated center and north vs. the generally

Shiite south - religious identities are likely to remain a significant source of identity within Iraqi politics for some time to come. Though many Americans are likely to be suspicious of the prominent role that religious identities will consequently play in Iraqi politics, they will do well to remember the often positive role that "Christian" parties played in the development of democratic politics in European history, especially where Christians were deeply divided.

Finally, we must resist equating the politics of all Shiite Muslims with the theocratic domination of neighboring Iran. Aside from the fact that the Shiites of both Iran and Iraq exhibit a broad variety of political tendencies, many prominent leaders of the Iraqi Shiites - from the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential religious leader, to Ahmed Chalabi, once the designated favorite of the Pentagon - have been among the most consistent supporters of the electoral process in Iraq. In fact, these same leaders have been instrumental in channeling occasionally violent Shiite opposition to the American occupation, especially that of Moqtada al-Sadr, into peaceful competition within the electoral process.

None of this suggests that peace and stability will come quickly or easily to Iraq. Still, there is reason to hope that a new Shiite-dominated regime elected by a clear majority of Iraqis would have a significantly better chance of survival against the Sunni-led opposition than the interim regime installed by a foreign occupation force. Thus, it would surely be yet another tragic misjudgment of political reality in Iraq to reject a priori a Shiite victory as a threat to democracy. Indeed, to embrace the likely victory of the broad coalition of both religious and secular Shiites that is competing in this election may be the best opportunity we have had to give peace a chance.

The writer is professor of history at Purchase College, SUNY, and director of a Ford Foundation project on the politics of religious coexistence in post-Reformation Europe.

LOAD-DATE: February 1, 2005
