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The Courage of Citizenship—A Day of Hope in Iraq

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Scenes of bravery and courage were found all throughout Iraq on January 30 as the nation turned out to vote. Defying predictions that they would respond with passivity and fear, millions of Iraqi citizens went to polling places and cast their votes for the country’s National Assembly, which will be assigned the task of writing the country’s new constitution.

Early reports indicated that election participation may have run as high as 72 percent of registered voters. Those projections, lowered to something over 60 percent of the electorate, still represent a massive vote of confidence in the possibility that Iraq will emerge from the oppression of Saddam Hussein and the experience of the recent war with a new government, a new hope, and a new faith in freedom.

Even as election officials count the ballots, the stories coming out of Iraq warm the heart and fly in the face of the naysayers.

Take the case of Samir Hassan, for instance. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], Mr. Hassan “refused to let the security ban on private cars stop him from voting, despite losing his leg to a bomb last October.” As Mr. Hassan told the reporter, “I would have crawled here if I had to. I don’t want terrorists to kill other Iraqis like they tried to kill me. Today I am voting for peace.”

In its January 31, 2005 edition, The New York Times seemed to catch the spirit of the day and the triumph of the Iraqi people. As reporter David E. Sanger explained, “Just short of two years after engineering the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, President Bush on Sunday celebrated a comparatively peaceful day of voting in Iraq, declaring in a triumphant moment in his effort to spur democratic movements throughout the Middle East.”

Indeed, President George W. Bush did celebrate with the Iraqi people. “The people of Iraq have spoken to the world, and the world is hearing the voice of freedom from the center of the Middle East,” the president said.

The American press, echoing the arguments found throughout Western Europe, had warned that the election date should be pushed back, later into 2005. Many were predicting a low voter turnout, arguing that the Iraqi people were not ready to vote and that the political situation was too volatile for a satisfactory election.

Nevertheless, President Bush and the Iraqi people pressed on, and Sunday’s vote is evidence that decisive leadership can enliven and encourage an entire nation.

As even The New York Times was led to comment, “At least for now, the large turnout appeared to vindicate the strategy to hold elections sooner rather than later, over the objections of many Sunni leaders and in the face of the ferocious insurgency. That strategy, advocated by both Ayatollah Sistani and President Bush, drew criticism that it would further divide the country and that, in any case, the Iraqis were not ready.” In that same edition of the paper, reporter John F. Burns described the courage of the Iraqi people: “Nobody among the hundreds of voters thronging one Baghdad polling station on Sunday could remember anything remotely like it, not even those old enough to have taken part in Iraq’s last partly free elections more than 50 years ago, before the assassination of King Faisal II began a spiraling descent into tyranny.” As Burns explained, “The scene was suffused with the sense of civic spirit that has seemed, so often in America’s 22 months here, like a missing link in the plan to build democracy in Iraq. Gone, for this day at least, was the suspicion that 24 years of bludgeoning under Saddam Hussein had bred a disabling passivity among the country’s 28 million people, and unwillingness, among many, to become committed partners in fashioning their own freedoms.”

For many voters, the national event became a family affair. As recounted in The Financial Times, “Whole families turned out, with children accompanying adults to witness the first multi-party election in Iraq for more than half a century, a poll in which the Shia are expected to assert their numerical superiority after decades of being marginalized and politically dominated by the minority Sunni Arabs.” As the paper documented, some of the voters were physically disabled and voting under situations of both threat and difficulty. Nevertheless, they turned out to vote—with electoral rates running above 70 percent at some polling stations.

One of the most eloquent testimonies to the importance of the Iraqi election came from an Iraqi-born American. Bakhtiar Dargali, writing on the Op/Ed page of The New York Times, explained that he and his wife had changed their minds, after first deciding that they would not vote as expatriate Iraqis in the election.

Dargali’s story should move every heart that beats for freedom. “In 1976, when I was 15, my older brother and I left behind our parents, four brothers, three sisters, 500 cousins and our beloved village of Dargala, in the Kurdish part of Iraq, to come to the United States,” he related. “We also left behind many bad memories: of hiding out in freezing caves in the mountains to escape the Baathists’ bombardment of the Kurds, of seeing our uncle’s family blown up by government planes.”

“What we didn’t have was any memories of seeing anyone in our family vote. Saddam Hussein’s candidates always won 100 percent of the vote, but the election booths in our section of Iraq were in the form of mass graves. There was no indelible ink to prevent fraud in elections, only the indelible pain of broken dreams and the loss of loved ones since our part of Kurdistan was annexed to Iraq in the 1920’s.”

Once in America, Bakhtiar Dargali became an American citizen, and had the opportunity to participate in American elections. “When I voted in this country for the first time,” he remembers, “I thought how lucky Americans were. A vote is taken for granted here, while back in Iraq people died (and are dying now) for it. I’ve voted in every election here since.”

Dargali then shifted to Iraq, where he looked forward to his entire family voting in the election. “For my 72-year-old father and my 70-year-old mother, it will be their first time. My mother told me that she had braved the current blizzard in the mountains of Kurdistan to go vote, even though she is very ill. My father, a Kurdish freedom fighter for two decades looks forward to voting as eagerly as a child waiting to open his Christmas gifts.”

While the pessimists suggest that Iraq is not ready—or will never be ready—for democracy, Dargali asks Americans to remember the people of Iraq, especially the Kurds. “They do not want America to fail in its effort to bring democracy to Iraq,” he insists.

Why did Mr. Dargali originally decide not to vote in the Iraqi elections? As an American, he felt that he should leave the voting to the Iraqis, even though he retains strong ties to his homeland. Then, something happened.

As he explains, “But then came the news that 31 marines died on Wednesday [January 26] in Western Iraq when their helicopter crashed as they were on what Gen. John Abizaid said was a ‘mission in support of the election.’” This changed everything for Dargali.

“How can I ignore the sacrifices of those marines who died so my family can vote?” he asked. “The best way for me to honor their martyrdom is to vote myself.”

With a touching flourish, Bakhtiar Dargali ended his testimony with these words: “That means that my wife, Allea, and I are driving to Nashville [one of the five designated locations for expatriate Iraqis to vote]. Coming along with us will be our 7-year-old daughter, Connie. She will get to see something that I never got to see as a child: her parents voting for freedom in an Iraqi election.”

Without doubt, Iraq still has a long way to go before it can claim a functioning democratic government, and before American troops, administrators, and advisors are able to leave the nation. Nevertheless, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of Sunday’s election. For the first time, a major Arab nation has held a fully open election, putting power in the hands of its people, and empowering all citizens to cast a vote for the future of their country.

This cannot go without notice in the Middle East. Like the first crack in a giant glacier of Arab autocracy, this election stands as irrefutable evidence that Arabs can vote, will vote, and have both the passion and the right to determine their own national destiny.

The naysayers in Europe and in the United States have a lot of explaining to do. Senator John Kerry, the Democratic nominee in the 2004 presidential election, should be humiliated by his attempt to appear unimpressed as he appeared on “Meet the Press” Sunday morning. “No one in the United States should try to overhype this election,” he asserted. He went on to continue his opposition to President Bush’s leadership of the challenge in Iraq, apparently unable even to congratulate the Iraqi people on a day of unquestioned accomplishment and national achievement.

More to the point, while the pessimists in Western nations may be embarrassed by their empty predictions of a failed election, the response in other Arab capitals should be far more dramatic. The autocratic despots of the Arab world must surely see this election as a sign that time is running out. Once freedom is set loose in the Middle East, it will not stop at the borders of Iraq. It will eventually make its way across the Middle East, the gulf states, and North Africa.

No one said it would be easy, and we must all honor the valiant service of those who have died in the name of freedom so that the Iraqi people would have the opportunity of Sunday’s vote.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair put the vote in perspective. “It may have been the force of arms that removed Saddam and created the circumstances in which Iraqis could vote,” Blair argued, “but it was the force of freedom that was felt throughout Iraq today.” Iraq did feel the force of freedom on Sunday—and that force was felt not only by freedom’s friends, but its enemies as well. That noise you hear is the sound of autocrats shuddering.

