

Key to a New Iraq

Iraqis voted on Thursday, exercising their right to elect a parliament and government for the first time. By all accounts, it was a success, with over 70 per cent voter turnout within Iraq and about 30-35 per cent from among Iraqis living outside the country.

Clearly, the number of Sunnis voting was far higher than that in the Jan. 30 elections to the interim assembly which supervised the process of drafting the country's post-war, post-Saddam constitution. That reflected a positive turn in thinking among the Sunni community of some five million people. A majority among them seems to have realised that the best option is to adapt to the changed situation in the country and ensure their interests through partici-

pating in the political process rather than putting up armed resistance and challenging inevitable changes.

Notably, the number of attacks against voters and voting centres were remarkably low. Insurgent groups could put up many claims, but the reality could not be overlooked that there is a shift in the mood of the Iraqis, away from extending support for the guerrilla war that is wreaking havoc in life in the country. They have been paying a high price for the insurgency, as seen from the number of Iraqis who died in guerrilla attacks.

The shift might be slow and not too powerful, but it is a starting point for the Iraqis to move towards putting their lives right and addressing the abnormalities that plague them on a daily



basis and on all fronts. However, that does not mean that the Iraqis are ready or should be ready to accept externally imposed changes that are designed to serve external interests before Iraqi interests. There is indeed a contradiction there, but this is an issue that needs to be tackled with the participation of the Arab world, as well as the international community, since external forces are heavily involved in the equation, with the Iraqis having little choice of action on their own under the current circumstances.

Since the US-led invasion in March 2003 and the ouster of Saddam in

early April that year, the Shiites have been dreaming of the day when they would be in power after decades of being oppressed and denied their rightful role in the country's political system. They seem to have moved closer to realising their dreams, but they should realise that it is not a mutually exclusive game. Simply by securing the strongest showing in elections that would allow them to form a coalition government they should not behave in a manner that denies others their rights as citizens of Iraq and subjects them to oppression.

This new spirit of really accepting, rather than virtually tolerating, the other sects, religions, factions and ethnic groups might be the key to a new Iraq.

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Iraqi Electoral Commission workers collate filled ballots before counting votes during Iraq's parliamentary elections in central Baghdad, Dec. 15. (Reuters File Photo)

US Plays 'I Spy'

George W. Bush's decision to authorize intelligence agents to electronically eavesdrop on people in the United States without court-approved warrants is a stunning example of the president's apparent disdain for the rights of ordinary people, the Constitution and the rule of law.

According to the New York Times, starting in 2002 Bush turned the National Security Agency loose to monitor the international phone calls and e-mail of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people in this country. The president's green light marked a profound shift in the intelligence-gathering practices of the National Security Agency (NSA), which has traditionally operated abroad. It was also almost certainly illegal and unconstitutional. Such snooping must be stopped.

The White House, tellingly, has not challenged the Times' account. Officials have instead attempted to justify the eavesdropping, citing the need to move quickly in the war on terror, while insisting that Bush would never order anything illegal.

That rings hollow coming from an administration under fire for abusing detainees and trying to legally redefine torture while insisting it would never torture anyone. It is an administration that placed itself above the law in claiming the power to indefinitely lock up American citizens whom it labeled enemy combatants, without criminal charges, legal representation or a day in court. It is an administration dogged by accusations of ghost detainees, secret prisons and delivering detainees for interrogation in countries known to use torture.

There are people in the world who would like nothing better than to do the United States harm. Washington should work overtime to uncover those plotters and their plots. But that does not justify the NSA's disturbingly un-American violation of the right to privacy. It was just that kind of

unchecked spying on Vietnam War protesters and civil rights activists in the 1970s that prompted Congress to establish the secretive Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, which provides a legal, regulated avenue for such monitoring. Intelligence operatives, usually from the FBI, have only to show probable cause to believe that a person is an agent of a foreign power or an international terrorist group to get a warrant to monitor their communications.

The court is readily accessible, able to respond quickly and has granted thousands of warrants over the years. It has, in fact, almost never refused a request. There was no need for an end run around the court and no justification for skirting the law.

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Free Speech on Trial

Not so long ago, there was jubilation that the free world and its values had prevailed in the Cold War. When the Communist empire collapsed, some even announced that the victory of liberty and democracy implied the "end of history".

But history never bowed out; at most, it only took a decade-long intermission, with its next act heralded by the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001. And here the plot has thickened. Instead of rejoicing in the liberal order, those of us who have the pleasure of living under it have had to struggle to keep it intact and strong.

Since 9/11, more and more freedoms are being restricted in the name of defending liberty. New visa requirements and other obstacles to travel, more intimate data collected by governments, and the presence of video cameras everywhere—at once benign and intrusive—remind one more of George Orwell's Big Brother than of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty.

Britain is not the only country where ancient rights of habeas corpus, of the inviolability of the person, are to be restricted by new legislation that, for example, extends the permissible length of detention without charge. Now, even the fundamental right of a liberal order, free speech, is under pressure.

Some restrictions are understandable legacies of the past, but must nevertheless be re-examined. In Austria, the historian David Irving was arrested recently because he has denied that the Holocaust happened. In the prison library, however, Irving found two of the books he had written that had led to his arrest! In Berlin, there is much concern about the possible desecration of the Holocaust

Memorial, although its author, the American architect Peter Eisenmann, takes a relaxed view of what is said and done about his creation.

Can such demands for restricting free speech ever be legitimate? The first and principled answer must surely be no. All freedoms can be abused by liberty's enemies, but in the case of speech, the risk posed by restricting freedom is surely greater.

Moreover, the benefits of tolerating free speech outweigh the harm of abusing it. Indeed, the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen has demonstrated that free speech even helps mitigate seemingly natural catastrophes like famines, because it reveals the ways in which a few have exploited the many have-nots. As the watchdog organisation Transparency International reminds us, corruption exposed is in many cases corruption prevented. These practical consequences are above and beyond the liberating effect of allowing the "marketplace of ideas", rather than state authorities, to judge people's expressed views.

Free speech is immensely precious, and so is the dignity and integrity of humans. Both require active and alert citizens who engage what they do not like rather than calling for the state to clamp down on it. Direct incitement to violence is regarded—as it should be—as an unacceptable abuse of free speech; but much that is disagreeable about the David Irvings and the hate preachers does not fall into this category. Their rants should be rejected with argument, not with police and prisons.

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A Greater Game

To listen to Western commentators, Washington, Moscow and Beijing are in the early rounds of a new Great Game, akin to the 19th century struggle between Czarist Russia and the British Empire for primacy in Central Asia. Unable to resist the analogy, analysts sound more like sports announcers, calling every play as a gain or loss for the players on the field.

The July summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—made up of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—was billed as a "NATO of the East," a new team to counter American global dominance. The SCO's call for a timetable for withdrawal of US forces from bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was seen as the opening play. Uzbekistan's subsequent decision to evict American forces and to forge a new defence pact with Russia last month was called a strategic loss for Washington and a win for Moscow.

Likewise, China's recent purchase of the second-largest oil company in Kazakhstan and a new oil pipeline and railroad between the two countries have been portrayed as proof of Beijing's unmatched economic prowess in the region.

While colourful, such commentary fails to capture the real situation on the ground. First, the grand prize itself—political, economic and military influence over these oil-rich republics—may not be the trophy some imagine. Though the Bush administration seeks to turn the region into a "corridor of reform," with Kazakhstan as a "regional leader" (in free markets, if not free elections), Central Asia largely remains a corridor of criminality, oppression and corruption.

So in fact, Uzbekistan's evocation of the Americans and its new bear hug with Russia may turn out to be a blessing for Washington and a curse for Moscow. Second, despite old ethnic ties to Russia and new economic links with

China, the region increasingly looks West. Kazakhstan, among the world's largest remaining oil and natural gas reserves, plans to tap into the new Caspian pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey, thereby reducing its dependence on oil export routes through Russia. Meanwhile, the United States has become Kazakhstan's largest foreign investor.

Third, Russia, with its declining population, exodus of capital and demoralised military, is too weak and China, with its voracious appetite for energy and exploding population is too feared to dominate the region.

Rumours about a new Russian-Chinese alliance are also greatly exaggerated. Russian and Chinese troops did indeed this summer conduct their first military exercise ever. But historic mistrust and potentially explosive border disputes between the two powers suggest that closer ties are more a tactical, temporary partnership rather than a long-term strategic alliance. Indeed, the SCO would more likely be a way for Moscow and Beijing to keep a check on each other in Central Asia rather than for keeping the Americans out.

Finally, economic and political jockeying is unlikely to escalate into military conflict. As General Charles Wald, deputy commander of US forces in Europe, tells me, "although progress is often interrupted by political concerns, our military-to-military relations with the Russians improve every year."

Rather than be lured into a zero-sum Great Game of inevitable confrontation, Washington, Moscow and Beijing should recognise Central Asia as an opportunity for cooperation against the one danger that threatens all three—Islamic terrorism.

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Spinning Russia

hostility to Moscow-based journalists [among Kremlin advisors and senior bureaucrats]. They believe Moscow correspondents have become captive to the Moscow liberal intelligentsia."

In this narrative, the Western media are excessively influenced by anti-Kremlin oligarchs, such as Vladimir Gusinsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who have spent hundreds of millions of dollars hiring Western public relations and lobbying firms. When former Kremlin Chief of Staff Aleksandr Voloshin was told of the Western media's negative reaction to Khodorkovsky's arrest, he is reported to have said "When Yukos' money dries up, so will these reports."

Whether the Western media bias is real or not, the Russian government certainly thinks it is, and it has launched a PR campaign to improve its image in the eyes of the world. Why does this response come now, at a time when Russia needs the West less than at any time in the past 20 years? One can only assume that the campaign is in preparation for the G-8 summit in Russia next year, when, in McFaul's words, "7,000 foreign journalists will descend on St. Petersburg looking for

something to write about." Although oil-rich Russia may not need the West's financial assistance anymore, Putin and his team still have an overriding desire to see Russia accepted at the top table of global affairs.

In late 2003, the Kremlin decided to make the state news agency, Novosti, its main instrument for image improvement. It booted upstains the agency's previous chairman, and hired in his place Svetlana Mironyuk—a former senior public relations advisor to Gusinsky, one of the most PR-savvy of the old generation of Russian business tycoons. Mironyuk had great success selling Gusinsky to Western investors, partly by teaming up with Western PR firms. The Kremlin and Novosti are bypassing the pesky Moscow-based journalists with a two-pronged strategy. Soon, the news network will go global with its own recently launched English-language TV channel, Russia Today. With a staff of 300 journalists, including around 70 imported from abroad, the channel will offer

"global news from a Russian perspective." In addition, Novosti has hired some notably Kremlin-friendly foreign journalists to work for its own news wire service. It has even launched its own English-language magazine, Russia Profile, written by an in-house staff.

On a second front, Moscow last year inaugurated the Valdai Discussion Club, an annual meeting for foreign experts and foreign journalists invited to Russia in the Kremlin's dime. Invitees meet and mingle with senior figures from the Russian political scene. They are even treated to a one-on-one session with President Putin himself, which lasted more than three hours last year and nearly as long this year. Moscow-based journalists are pointedly not on the invite list.

The success of these ventures in altering Russia's image has so far been mixed. Some dismiss the Novosti initiatives as blatant propaganda. But, in fact, they mirror what many rich countries do to improve cultural and diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. The aberration is not that Russia is trying its hand at public diplomacy, but that it has avoided it for so long. Its communication policy with the West was often inept, even as late as

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