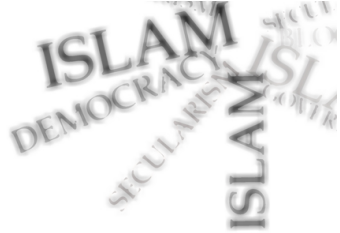


Political Islam Online

Lost Dignity Regained

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The most important result of the Iraqi elections is rarely mentioned in the Western press. Through the limited victory of the secular *Iraqiyya* party, the *Sunnis* have regained their “lost dignity”. That victory was achieved through a secular coalition in which the majority of *Sunnis* were joined by some secular *Shi’a* members to narrowly defeat the sectarian rule of the *Maliki*. That achievement could alter the philosophical thinking of *Sunnis*, and many others, throughout the Arab World.

Those familiar with Arab culture understand the primordial importance that pride and dignity play in the Arab psyche. The scent of victory has once more proven to be far more important than ideology in shaping the attitudes of many Arabs from all sectors of society. The feeling of pride regained is triggering an interesting and unexpected reassessment and reinterpretation of beliefs by an unlikely group – *Sunni* Islamists, many of whom maintained for years that the Islamic rule has no place for a secular authority.

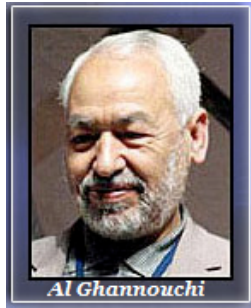


Al Maliki

Allawi

PI Online examines Arab Islamic writers who, after witnessing this political achievement, seem to be supporting, albeit reluctantly, this improbable transition towards secularism. Although there are still many obstacles to be overcome before a secular democracy could take hold in Iraq, the positive changes in philosophical outlook emerging throughout the Arab world as a result of the political victory in Iraq may prove to be of major importance, if properly nurtured.

Writing independently in *Al Jazeera*, Islamists *Rashed Al Ghannouchi* and *Yasser al-Za’aterah* both appeared to acknowledge that a secular coalition is the best alternative for governing Iraq. *Al-Ghannouchi* observes that the Islamic parties – the *Shi’a* in Iraq and Iran and the *Sunni* in Afghanistan, the Sudan and Yemen – were unable to govern peacefully or democratically in societies composed of multiple sects. That is a stunning admission for an Islamist¹. He also concedes (and admires) the fact that differences among parties are peacefully resolved in the West through a democratic process, while resolving differences in the Middle East remains a forceful and brutal process. In the West, according to *Al Ghannouchi*, religion became a private matter while in Islam it remained open to public interpretation giving rise to an unlimited number of contradictory, sectarian beliefs and to the meddling of the government in religious affairs.



Al Ghannouchi

Al Ghannouchi reluctantly comes to the conclusion that the best way to govern Iraq at present is to move away from religion to an enlightened Western style democracy. Looking at another article in *Al-Jazeera*², however, it is apparent that he still finds the secular solution a bitter pill to swallow. *Al Ghannouchi* also made the interesting observation that while Muslims have come to accept other religions outside Islam, they are not willing to accept different sects within Islam. *Al Ghannouchi* describes the *Shi’a-Sunni* conflict, with some justification, as the result of a political power struggle rather than an ideological battle. He encourages Muslims to put aside their sectarian differences and unite under a different more encompassing kind of Islam devoid of fractious animosity in order to achieve political gains. *Al Ghannouchi’s* acceptance of a nationalistic Iraqi coalition of *Sunnis* and *Shi’a* is, of course, facilitated by the fact that the *Sunnis* remain a minority in Iraq. In predominantly *Sunni* countries we do not find a similar acceptance of the *Shi’a* or other Muslim denominations. In Egypt, for example, *Al Azhar* often warns against the spread of the *Shi’a* sect and the government joins in by politicizing the process and blaming Iran for the *Shi’a* incursion into Egypt.

Another writer, *Yasser al-Za’aterah*³, attributes the victory of the *Al Iraqiyya* coalition party to two different factors. The first is his belief that the majority of *Sunnis* prefer a secular governing style. *Al Za’aterah* rejects that notion, however.

¹ March 29th 2010 - <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/CE7E56B1-B766-49DC-B9A7-7CA179624E06.htm>

² April 18th, 2010 - <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/84404E2B-EE6B-478F-859A-D222C986F895.htm>

³ March 29, 2010 - <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4122947A-DCB1-4731-83D0-FC71321927Fo.htm>

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He opines that it is the failure of the Islamic party to build a political following in Iraq that lead the Sunnis to make the only other possible choice. While *Al-Za'aterah* attributes many of the *Sunnis'* problems to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, he considers the religious *Sunni* experience in Iraq a failure that should be a lesson for the Muslim Brotherhood in general. *Al-Za'aterah* does not, however, explain how he would remedy that failure.

Al Ghannouchi also maintains that the U.S. is not necessarily as interested in supporting one party against the other as in extricating its armies from Iraq. The *Sunnis'* regained pride, however, seems to have opened the door for Arab countries with a majority *Sunni* population to positively support a *Shi'a-Sunni* coalition. It was, for example, no coincidence that the Saudi King publicly offered this past week to play a constructive role in bringing together the various factions in Iraq to form a government – a position he would have been unable to take publicly a few months ago. It is also a well known fact that Turkey, having decided that it was no longer practical to do business with the *Maliki* regime, is pleased with the *Iraqiyya* coalition victory and is looking for a rapprochement between the *Sunnis* and the *Kurds*.

Acceptance of a national secular government may be short lived, however, if those who benefit from sectarian animosity succeed in reversing the process. As *Ghassan Cherbel* writes in *Al Hayat* today, “Any *Sunni-Shi'a* rapprochement tightens the rope around *Al Qaeda* and any *Sunni* moderation dries the water in which it swims”.⁴ Thus, two unlikely partners may coalesce to kill that secular tendency: *Al Maliki* and *Al-Qaeda*. The horrific *Al-Qaeda* bombing this past Friday in Baghdad, which mainly targeted the *Shi'a*, was intended to reignite the sectarian war. Then, yesterday the Iraqi court⁵ annulled the candidacy of 52 individuals, after the parliamentary elections were over, for seemingly having ties with the defunct Baath party. That decision is believed to have been influenced or dictated by *Al Maliki* as a blatant show of political force in order to retain power but may most likely also foment open warfare.

The *Sunni's* regained dignity is priceless and should be supported by the West as a foundation on which to build peaceful co-existence between the *Shi'a* and the *Sunnis*. It would be a shame to let this opportunity slip away when there is so much at stake: a tangible peace in Iraq and a growing philosophical acceptance of secularism throughout the entire Arab World. Let us not give those *Sunni* Islamists who are beginning to accept the secular solution a reason or opportunity to change course.

Almost two years ago, I wrote that the pain and suffering caused by killing among *Shi'a* and *Sunnis* in Iraq was too great for Iraq to rebuild without separation of the parties within a confederation.⁶ The latest election results have caused me to think now that it may be possible to bury the past. We should do everything in our power to seize on that opportunity of regained dignity and make that happen.

Postscript (May 9th, 2010): It is becoming clear that the *Shi'a* are closing ranks to eliminate any possibility that *Alawi* will become prime minister. The influence of Iran seems to have carried the day while Western countries and the Arab world stood watching. Forty members loyal to *Al-Sadr* won parliamentary seats and threw their weight behind the *Al-Maliki* group and the *Kurds* are looking to join in, provided they get some concessions. The result would be to marginalize the *Iraqiyya* party and their *Sunni* supporters. There is some talk about replacing *Al-Maliki*, but this would not be enough to indicate true change. While this maneuvering appears to be the will of the majority operating through a democratic process, one thing is certain. It will perpetuate the sectarian divisions in Iraq that have created years of upheaval. Without national power sharing with the *Sunnis*, *Al Qaeda* members will be waiting in the wings recruiting more frustrated *Sunnis* to join their ranks. The Islamists will simply say, “we told you so” and an escalation of sectarian violence will likely follow. The restored dignity of all these moderate secular *Sunnis* will be short lived.

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⁴ April 26th, 2010 <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/134536>

⁵ April 26th, 2010 - <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/04/26/106911.html>

⁶ Iraq by the Numbers http://www.politicalislam.org/embed_doc.php?ArticleID=245

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