

# Iraq's Ban on Democracy

By Kenneth M. Pollack and Michael E. O'Hanlon

WASHINGTON WITH Washington's attention understandably focused on the tragedy in Haiti, Iraq has slipped onto the back burner. Yet there is a major problem brewing there — one that could jeopardize President Obama's plan to draw down American forces and even reignite sectarian conflict.

Last Thursday, Iraq's Independent High Election Commission upheld a ban on nearly 500 Sunni politicians handed down (possibly illegally) some days earlier by the Accountability and Justice Commission. They were accused of having had ties to the Baath Party of Saddam Hussein. Among those proscribed from running in the nationwide elections scheduled for March 7 were Defense Minister Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi and Saleh al-Mutlaq, one of Iraq's most influential Sunni politicians. Although confusion reigns, it is rumored that the brief appeal process will end Tuesday and, at present, it seems unlikely to ameliorate the situation.

The two commissions are dominated by officials appointed by Prime Min-

## Who is behind a ploy to disqualify 500 Sunni candidates?

ister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, so it's not surprising that many Iraqis believe that the prime minister's Shiite-dominated government is disqualifying large numbers of political rivals, particularly Mr. Mutlaq, who had already allied himself with Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister widely considered Mr. Maliki's most dangerous foe. There is no evidence of this, but the perception is widespread and in Iraq, perception can do as much damage as reality. Meanwhile, many informed Americans and Iraqis are pointing to Ahmed Chalabi, the one-time political favorite of the Bush administration, as the real culprit. Mr. Chalabi, they say, is trying to manipulate the elections to become prime minister by default.

It's true that many of the disqualified politicians were once Baathists. But Iraq needs reconciliation, not payback. Any bans must be careful, selective and well-explained. They should not disqualify people like the defense minister — a former Baathist, but one who turned against the party in the 1990s and was imprisoned and tortured by the regime. Moreover, in recent years he has served the new Iraqi government loyally.

Before the surge of American troops in 2007 and the so-called Anbar Awakening, many Iraqi Sunnis boycotted Iraq's elections in the belief that the system was rigged against them. This created a self-fulfilling prophecy when the elections took place without them and the resulting government was dominated by Shiite and Kurdish groups. This vicious cycle helped fuel civil war. All of that changed after 2007, when

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## Op-Art

WHITFIELD LOVELL

# The Dream, Described



"KIN II (OH DAMBALLAH)," CONTÉ CRAYON ON PAPER WITH FOUND PAPER FLAGS ON A STRING. COURTESY DC MOORE GALLERY.

*The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whom we honor today, talked about the disparity between promise and reality in America. This work — a conté crayon drawing with garlands of American flags — is meant to explore those themes, too. It juxtaposes a black woman's face with the flag to conjure the complex relationship between African-Americans and patriotism. The tension grows out of the contradiction of living in a country that did not afford my ancestors basic human rights — while at the same time being fully aware and proud of the contributions those very ancestors made to our history and culture.*

American-brokered cease-fires and political shifts convinced Sunnis that they would have a fair opportunity to elect their own leaders and participate in government at no disadvantage. In the provincial elections of January 2009, Sunnis finally voted in large numbers. Their return to the political process has been a key element in the rapid erosion of sectarianism from Iraqi politics. The end of the civil war and the need to focus on political and economic reconstruction had revealed sharp differences among the various Shiite groups, which have been heightened by the emergence of Sunni parties with similarly varied views.

As a result, there has been a complete reorganization of Iraqi politics over the past year, with Shiite, Sunni and even some Kurdish groups creating cross-sectarian alliances that have largely replaced the previous sectarian blocs. It was a sign of this progress that Sunni parties, particularly Mr. Mutlaq's, were

being courted avidly by a number of Shiite and secular parties, including those led by Mr. Maliki and Mr. Allawi.

If the ban is allowed to stand, it will do more than just throw a wrench in the works. It will persuade a great many Iraqis that the prime minister or other Shiites, like Mr. Chalabi, are using their control over the electoral mechanics to kneecap their rivals. It may also convince many Sunnis that they will never be allowed to win if they play by the rules, and that violence is their only option.

That is an extraordinarily dangerous message to send right now, when the United States is trying hard to withdraw tens of thousands more American troops from Iraq and shift 50,000 or so from combat operations to advisory and training roles. If this ban remains in effect, the likelihood of electoral violence will skyrocket, and American soldiers will inevitably be called on to halt it.

All is not yet lost — over the past few

years, Iraqi politicians have developed a penchant for last-minute compromise that has turned a number of near-catastrophes into mere close calls. In every one of those instances, however, it required rapid and determined American pressure to avert disaster.

The American Embassy in Baghdad is working feverishly to persuade the Iraqis to change course. Time is of the essence — especially if the Accountability and Justice Commission's appeals process ends on Tuesday. If the United States doesn't act before the deadline, the bans will become much harder to roll back.

The threat of crisis is real enough that Vice President Joe Biden, who has played a useful role in backing up Ambassador Christopher Hill on several occasions lately, will have to help. It even merits direct involvement by President Obama. It is just this kind of seemingly small problem that could unravel the entire political fabric of Iraq. □

## ROSS DOUTHAT

# Internet Politics From Both Sides Now

For a brief shining moment, late in the 2008 campaign, Democrats thought that they might own the Internet.

For decades, they had watched their Republican rivals exploit alternative media to raise money, organize voters and whip up outrage. In the 1970s, conservatives pioneered direct-mail fund-raising. In the early 1990s, they ruled the talk-radio dial. Early in the Bush era, they dominated cable news.

But the Internet was going to be different. Direct mail, talk radio, the cable shoutfests — these were inherently conservative technologies, pitched to senior citizens and middle-aged suburbanites. The Internet was for the young, the hip, the multicultural, the liberal. Let the G.O.P. be the party of Fox News. The Democrats would be the party of Google, YouTube and Facebook.

During the 2008 campaign, that's exactly what they were. In a race where the Republican nominee didn't know how to use the Internet, Barack Obama was the Internet: sleek, protean and ubiquitous. The Obama campaign dominated online fund-raising, online organizing and social media. This virtual edge translated into an enormous real-world advantage — in dollars raised, enthusiasm harnessed and Election Day boots on the ground.

A year later, some of the Democrats' advantage is still there. But it's been crumbling ever since Obama took office. Republican politicians have taken over Twitter. Sarah Palin has 1.2 million fol-

lowers on Facebook. And in liberal Massachusetts, Scott Brown, the Republican Senate candidate, has used Internet fund-raising to put the fear of God into the Bay State's establishment.

Last Monday, Brown raised \$1.3 million from an online "money bomb," and his campaign reportedly went on to raise a million dollars a day throughout the week. The race's online landscape looks like last November's in reverse: from

## Will Republicans have their hearts broken, too?

YouTube views to Facebook fans to Twitter followers, Brown enjoys an Obamaesque edge over his Democratic rival, Martha Coakley.

In a recent tweet (how else?), Markos "Daily Kos" Moulitsas, the left-wing blogosphere's eminence grise, compared the Brown campaign to Paul Hackett's bid for an Ohio House seat in 2005. A liberal Democrat running in a conservative district, Hackett came up just short on Election Day. But his campaign offered a preview of the online surge that pushed Democrats over the top in 2006 and 2008.

Brown's race might actually end in tri-

umph, rather than a close defeat. But win or lose, he's demonstrated there's no necessary connection between online organizing and liberal politics. The Web is just like every pre-Internet political arena: ideology matters less than the level of anger at the incumbent party, and the level of enthusiasm an insurgent candidate can generate.

It's like other arenas, too, in its capacity to disappoint idealists. Indeed, it may be crueler to dreamers, because it offers an artificial sense of intimacy with politicians, without delivering any practical results. You can be Sarah Palin's pal on Facebook, or have Barack Obama's running-mate selection text-messaged to your cellphone. But Washington is still Washington, the legislative process is still the legislative process, and the power of an online community matters less than the power of the powerful.

This is the bitter lesson many net-roots types have drawn from Obama's first year in office. The promises of transparency have given way to the reality of backroom deal-cutting. The attempts to turn the campaign's online community, weakly re-dubbed Organizing for America, into a permanent political force have flopped. In a recent post on the Web site Personal Democracy Forum, Micah Sifry captured the free-floating sense of anger with Obama's governance: "The people who voted for him weren't organized in any kind of new or powerful way, and the special interests... sat first at the table and wrote

the menu. Myth met reality, and came up wanting."

If liberals are feeling disillusioned, though, their right-wing imitators may be ripe for an even greater letdown. The Obama administration has at least gone some distance toward enacting an agenda that the net-roots left supports. The "right roots" activists are rallying around politicians who are promising to shrink government without offering any plausible sketch of how to do it. When Scott Brown pledges an across-the-board tax cut and sweeping deficit reduction all at once, he's setting the conservative grass roots up for a major disappointment.

Maybe that's for the best. The Internet breeds utopian hopes, and sometimes even fulfills them. (The incredible outpouring of financial support for Haiti would have been smaller, slower and less effective in an offline age.)

But where our political process is concerned, this utopianism needs to be tempered by a realism that only hard experience can teach. Better if both right and left learn their lesson quickly — that technology changes, but politics remains the same. □

## ONLINE: OPINION TODAY

Home Fires Michael Jernigan, a veteran who was blinded in Iraq, on the importance of his guide dog.

[nytimes.com/opinionator](http://nytimes.com/opinionator)

## PAUL KRUGMAN

# What Didn't Happen

Lately many people have been second-guessing the Obama administration's political strategy. The conventional wisdom seems to be that President Obama tried to do too much — in particular, that he should have put health care on one side and focused on the economy.

I disagree. The Obama administration's troubles are the result not of excessive ambition, but of policy and political misjudgments. The stimulus was too small; policy toward the banks wasn't tough enough; and Mr. Obama didn't do

## What should Obama have done differently?

what Ronald Reagan, who also faced a poor economy early in his administration, did — namely, shelter himself from criticism with a narrative that placed the blame on previous administrations.

About the stimulus: it has surely helped. Without it, unemployment would be much higher than it is. But the administration's program clearly wasn't big enough to produce job gains in 2009.

Why was the stimulus underpowered? A number of economists (myself included) called for a stimulus substantially bigger than the one the administration ended up proposing. According to The New Yorker's Ryan Lizza, however, in December 2008 Mr. Obama's top economic and political advisers concluded that a bigger stimulus was neither economically necessary nor politically feasible.

Their political judgment may or may not have been correct; their economic judgment obviously wasn't. Whatever led to this misjudgment, however, it wasn't failure to focus on the issue: in late 2008 and early 2009 the Obama team was focused on little else. The administration wasn't distracted; it was just wrong.

The same can be said about policy toward the banks. Some economists defend the administration's decision not to take a harder line on banks, arguing that the banks are earning their way back to financial health. But the light-touch approach to the financial industry further entrenched the power of the very institutions that caused the crisis, even as it failed to revive lending: bailed-out banks have been reducing, not increasing, their loan balances. And it has had disastrous political consequences: the administration has placed itself on the wrong side of popular rage over bailouts and bonuses.

Finally, about that narrative: It's instructive to compare Mr. Obama's rhetorical stance on the economy with that of Ronald Reagan. It's often forgotten now, but unemployment actually soared after Reagan's 1981 tax cut. Reagan, however, had a ready answer for critics: everything going wrong was the result of the failed policies of the past. In effect, Reagan spent his first few years in office continuing to run against Jimmy Carter.

Mr. Obama could have done the same — with, I'd argue, considerably more justice. He could have pointed out, repeatedly, that the continuing troubles of America's economy are the result of a financial crisis that developed under the Bush administration, and was at least in part the result of the Bush administration's refusal to regulate the banks.

But he didn't. Maybe he still dreams of bridging the partisan divide; maybe he fears the ire of pundits who consider blaming your predecessor for current problems uncouth — if you're a Democrat. (It's O.K. if you're a Republican.) Whatever the reason, Mr. Obama has allowed the public to forget, with remarkable speed, that the economy's troubles didn't start on his watch.

So where do complaints of an excessively broad agenda fit into all this? Could the administration have made a midcourse correction on economic policy if it hadn't been fighting battles on health care? Probably not. One key argument of those pushing for a bigger stimulus plan was that there would be no second chance: if unemployment remained high, they warned, people would conclude that stimulus doesn't work rather than that we needed a bigger dose. And so it has proved.

It's important to remember, also, how important health care reform is to the Democratic base. Some activists have been left disillusioned by the compromises made to get legislation through the Senate — but they would have been even more disillusioned if Democrats had simply punted on the issue.

And politics should be about more than winning elections. Even if health care reform loses Democrats votes (which is questionable), it's the right thing to do.

So what comes next? At this point Mr. Obama probably can't do much about job creation. He can, however, push hard on financial reform, and seek to put himself back on the right side of public anger by portraying Republicans as the enemies of reform — which they are.

And meanwhile, Democrats have to do whatever it takes to enact a health care bill. Passing such a bill won't be their political salvation — but not passing a bill would surely be their political doom. □