

Iraqi Public Rejects Iranian Model

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But Wants Major Role for Islam in Government

By Steven Kull and Evan Lewis

Given the Shiite majority in Iraq, some have worried that the Iraqi electorate may vote in representatives that would institute a governmental system modeled on its Shiite neighbor Iran. Polling conducted over the last year, however, indicates that Iraqis clearly reject the Iranian model. At the same time, Iraqis want religion to play a major role in the new Iraqi government: support is strong for Iraq to be an explicitly Muslim state and for clerics to play an important advisory role. But this is all in the context of very strong support for Iraq being a democracy and for non-Muslims having the right to practice their religion.

In polling conducted in the spring of 2004 Gallup asked Iraqis to choose among seven forms of government. A mere 12% chose the option “An Islamic theocracy in which religious leaders or mullahs have a strong influence, such as in Iran.” Virtually none endorsed the model of former Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The most popular single model, endorsed by 40%, was for “a multiparty democracy such as that in most European and some Asian countries.” In a separate question only 22% said that what Iraq needs is a government “made up mostly of religious leaders.”

In April 2005, the International Republican Institute asked Iraqis what they think would be the most appropriate system for a future Iraqi government only 22% said they would prefer a “religious system” in Iraq. A strong majority of 63% said they would prefer a “parliamentary” (30%) or “mixed parliamentary/presidential” (33%) system.

Preferred Type of Government

Which do you think would be the most appropriate system for a future Iraqi government?

Mixed Parliamentary/Presidential



Parliamentary



Religious System



Monarchy



Other



International Republican Institute, 4/2005

Perhaps most telling, most Iraqis reject the idea of clerics actually being part of the government. A January 2005 poll by IRI asked Iraqis about “the role of religious leaders in politics and government.” Only 28% endorsed the view that religious leaders should be “elected to political office and serve in government.” The plurality (39%) opted for the view that religious leaders may endorse candidates but not serve in office—not unlike the way popular and influential Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf seems to function today. Twenty-three percent favored religious leaders remaining separate from political life and instead “focusing on spiritual and social life.”

In the spring of 2004 Gallup asked whether “religious leaders themselves—rather than government officials—should be directly in charge” of eight different government functions. For all eight functions only a small minority favored religious leaders being directly in charge including:

- Drafting Iraq's next constitution (24%)
- Writing national legislation to which all Iraqis would be subject (21%)
- Determining secular family law (17%)
- Deciding what may be broadcast on television or published in newspapers (15%)
- Deciding who may run for elected office (15%)
- Deciding how women may dress in public (15%)
- Deciding what will be taught in the country's schools (13%)
- Determining Iraq's foreign policy and its relations with other countries (13%)

Consistent with this opposition to direct clerical involvement in government, most Iraqis do not feel compelled to follow the views of clerics on political matters. In a December 2004 IRI poll, only 33% said they would “follow all decrees issued by clerics concerning the elections.”

Support for Religion Playing a Central Role

Role of Religious Leaders

Thinking about the role of religious leaders in politics and government, which of the following possibilities do you prefer?

Religious leaders are elected to political office and serve in government



Religious leaders may endorse candidates, but don't serve in office



Religious leaders maintain a separation focusing on spiritual and social life



International Republican Institute, 1/2005

At the same time Iraqis do want the religion to play a central role in the Iraqi government. Most reject the notion of a pure separation of church and state. In a spring 2004 Gallup poll, Iraqis were told that “there is a notion, which calls for the separation of religion from political government.” They were then asked whether they supported or opposed this notion. Among all Iraqis a 58% majority opposed this notion; only 31% supported it.

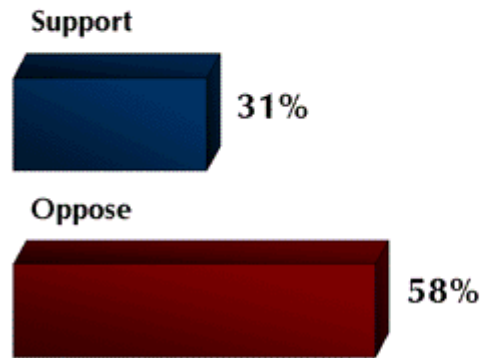
Overwhelming majorities support having Islam be the moral basis for the Iraqi legal system. In an August 2004 IRI poll 84% agreed (70% strongly), that, “the new Iraqi Constitution should take Islam and the Shari’a as the sole basis for all laws and legislation.”

In an April 2005 IRI poll that asked what the role of Islam should be in the creation of laws and legislation, three out of four Iraqis said Islam should be “the sole source” (35%) or “the main source” (40%). Only 12% said Islam should be only “one source” and a mere 2% that laws and legislation “should not be based on any religious source.”

Overwhelming majorities endorse the view that Iraq should be an Islamic state. Eighty-eight percent agreed that the “new Iraqi constitution should ensure the Islamic identity of Iraq” (IRI, August 2004). In an April 2005 IRI poll 92% agreed that “the new constitution should make Islam the official religion.”

Separation of Church and State

There is a notion, which calls for the separation of religion from political government. What is your stance on this issue? Do you:



Gallup 6/2004

Finally, though Iraqis do not want clerics to serve in government they do think that they should play a key role in shaping outcomes. In March 2005, IRI asked “in writing the constitution, whose input do you feel should be most important in creating a document that is acceptable to the Iraqi people?” A 59% majority of Iraqis chose clerics or religious leaders as their first (47%) or second choice (12%), outstripping the 30% who chose political party representatives (16% first choice, 14% second choice) or the 26% who chose the Prime Minister (10% first choice, 16% second choice).

As mentioned above, in the spring 2004 Gallup poll only small minorities favored clerics being directly in charge of eight specified government functions. However, very large majorities favored them advising the government officials holding these responsibilities.

Also, though most Iraqis say they would not feel compelled to adhere to clerics’ decrees on electoral matters, only 13% said they would ignore them. Three out of four said they would at least “listen to what clerics have to say” (25%), that the “guidance of clerics or religious organizations will be a major factor” in their participation in the elections” (16%) or that they would follow all of the decrees of the clerics (33%).

Support for Democracy and Rights of Non-Muslims

Islam as Basis for laws

The new Iraqi Constitution should take Islam and the Shari'a as the sole basis for all laws and legislation:

Agree



Disagree



International Republican Institute, 8/2004

Iraqis favor a democratic system of government. In the spring 2004 Gallup poll, 84% said that what Iraq needs is "an Iraqi democracy." In the April 2005 IRI poll 72% said they would prefer that the President be selected by "direct elections by the Iraqi people." Just 13% favored the president being appointed "by a National Assembly" and only 5% "by clerics or religious leaders."

A majority also supports protection of the rights of non-Muslims. In the spring 2004 Gallup poll 73% said that the Iraqi constitution should guarantee the right of Iraqi citizens to observe any religion of their choice. The April 2005 poll by IRI asked which rights should be part of the Constitution," an overwhelming 90% said "freedom to practice religion." A remarkable 92% agreed (68% strongly) that "basic human rights" should be part of the Constitution.