

Iraq – 2005 – Tihana Bartulac Blanc

Transcript

In December 2005, as Iraq prepared for its second post-Saddam election, which was a parliamentary election, a special early polling took place three days earlier for detainees, hospital patients and Iraqi security forces. I was a deputy chief of the party for a US NGO and a member of the International Assistance Team, which was advising the Independent [High] Electoral Commission (IHEC) of Iraq on elections.

As I advised the Commission on potentially allowing the detainee vote, and eventually drafted the procedures for special voting, I got a chance to travel to the largest of the detention facilities in Iraq—Abu Ghraib—to oversee the organization of these elections. Of course, Abu Ghraib was also the most notorious facility at the time, as just a year earlier US forces were captured torturing the inmates in the detention centers, and there was a global outcry. Here, there was an opportunity to be more inclusive of Iraqi voters and also present a more positive picture of the US engagement in Iraq.

The special vote was allowed after extensive internal debates within the election Commission about detainees' right to vote and international practice in special needs voting. There were no, at the time, international laws or even norms, especially in guiding the detainee voting. [However] the detention center was used extensively in Iraq for people who were awaiting trial, and were not yet convicted of any crimes. So the election commission decided that it was important to ensure their access to vote.

To do that we had to overcome a number of challenges, jointly with the election commission, which was organizing the election, and had to overcome a number of challenges. First, there was a fear that some detainees might threaten others, or prevent them from voting, and retaliate if anyone casts their ballot. Just like regular voters, detainees were given an opportunity to choose whether they wanted to vote or not.

Security, obviously, was the main challenge within the detention center. First, it was very important that the Iraqi election commission maintain the full control of the process for the electoral process because of their independence and for the credibility of the electoral process. At the same time securing detainees, had to involve prison authorities as well. A constitutional referendum that had taken place just two months earlier involved riots, including on the part of detainees in multiple detention centers. The detainees had to be transported within the prison in groups, and the size of the groups varied on the severity of their crime or their behavior in prison and some other factors. They had to be kept in staging areas. Then, even from the staging areas when they voted, as is typical in prisoner or detainee voting, they had to squat and they were secured to one another with chains. It was quite dramatic, the process, as some of the detainees could become, and some were, violent. To protect their identities, for example, they were identified by numbers, not by names. Their fingers were not inked, again to prevent subsequent retaliation for having voted. These security concerns also extended to others in the prison in the detention center, as observers, poll workers also had to be secured. Poll workers, for example, to protect their

identities, were offered masks and sunglasses, as, again, there was a potential danger to themselves and to their families.

Beyond security, they [detainees] were not exposed to any public voter education, they were not exposed to any political campaign. So again, we had to secure voting screens behind which they could study some materials and select their candidates, to provide them with at least some voter education.

Despite these challenges, the special voting did take place three days ahead of the regular voting, on December 12th 2005. I had traveled to Abu Ghraib a day earlier with a contingent of security personnel, a group of some five security guards. This was, at the time, the only way to move around, not just in a detention center, but in Iraq, even within the safe or so-called green Zone

We had to spend the night in the Detention Center, which we did in a sort of a prefabricated or sort of a container within a detention center, which was a combination of a hybrid between a bedroom and maybe a more comfortable prison cell. Altogether, the guards, a colleague and I, who were there to oversee the management of elections. After a somewhat sleepless night, we had a fairly smooth electoral process. The next day we did have a few irregularities. A guard, for example, who appeared to instruct the voters how to vote. The guard was removed immediately.

One thing I forgot to mention, there were more than 200 candidates on the ballot. So this was a fairly complex ballot, even for an experienced voter, let alone for a detainee who had not been exposed to voter education. These four page ballots were not used properly, so we had to use a ballot issuer to explain to, one by one, the detainees how each ballot worked.

The most notable incident, however, involved a cousin of Saddam Hussein, who was detained at Abu Ghraib, and who had clearly tried to intimidate his group. For example, when they were asked whether they wanted to exercise their vote, he would respond on their behalf, or he would refuse on their behalf, and no one contradicted him. We decided as a solution to still keep a polling station open the entire day, and by the end of the day a group of some 30 did decide to vote. But to do that, again, they had to be transported to the other side of the detention facilities to prevent any retaliation.

The media were, of course, not allowed to film the detainees, so there are no photographs or records of the voting itself, or as evidence of their participation. But there was some cheer and happiness, and proud expressions are still remembered by all of us who were there at the time. And if, again, these elections did not exactly usher democracy into Iraq, as I actually had mentioned in an article that I published about this process, it did present this more positive image and idea that is normally associated with US foreign assistance abroad.

The vote was also, probably, one of the most efficiently organized polls that I had witnessed at that point, after a decade of working on elections in post-conflict environments. At the end of the day some 3,000 or more than 3,000 detainees in Abu Ghraib took advantage of the opportunity to vote overall. There were 12,000 plus detainees. Hospital patients and special forces were

eligible to vote, and some 300,000 did in the end exercise their right to vote. Again, an important opportunity to extend an opportunity to vote and be a little more inclusive of all layers of Iraqi society. And of course, a thing that you might see on the website associated with this story, was a small ceremony that the prison authorities or detention facility authorities threw us to thank us for organizing elections, which showed probably the most organized set of ballot boxes with ballots that I've ever seen in the election that I have been a part of.