

Global Journalist: Iraqi Elections

In this January 27, 2005 program, host Stuart Loory talks to three journalists, Dahr Jamil in Baghdad, Maggy Zanger in Tucson, and Marty Schram in Washington about whether the upcoming elections in war-torn Iraq will lead the country to develop a democracy.

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Stuart Loory 00:00

Welcome to Global Journalists on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. The election in Iraq is now less than three days away and President Bush continues to hail it as a major step toward development of democracy in that war torn country. Will that really be so? The country is wracked by insurgency that instead of cooling things down, grows more and more violent. The victims are Iraqis, as well as Americans and other foreign nationals. The New York Times today says even Baghdad, the capital, is a city out of control either by the Iraqi government or American troops. This is an election that has a limited goal: the naming of delegates to a national assembly that will develop a constitution for the country. Voters will not press an opinion for candidates, but for slates of candidates representing parties among the Shia, Sunni or Kurdish Muslims, as well as other minority groups. There will be 66 different slates to choose from. There has been almost no campaigning by most of the slates. This is a very strange election indeed. This is a very strange election indeed. Today we'll talk about the campaign. Next week we'll discuss the results. Our guests are Martin Schram, a nationally syndicated columnist with the Scripps Howard News Service in Washington. Professor Maggy Zanger of the University of Arizona Journalism School in Tucson, Arizona. Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist in Baghdad. Let's start with Dahr Jamail, there are 66 slates of candidates, almost no campaigning. How can any voter explained how can any voter understand what the election is all about? Not to say who is running and what the candidates stand for?

Dahr Jamail 02:08

Well, we it's safe to say from what I've been seeing over the last few weeks, the theme of this election is that of chaos, frustration and violence. So many Iraqis, even those who are determined to vote, raise those same questions that you just pose. The frustrations around, not knowing who most of the candidates are feeling that frustration because so many of them that they do recognize, I have come in only recently to Iraq, they haven't been here over the last couple of decades along with the other Iraqis. And in addition to this, it that same situation bleeds over into the polling stations. The most of the locations of the polling stations has not been announced officially and won't be until just before the election. It's obvious now where many of them will be as they're beginning to put barricades, and sand barriers, razor wire around them to try to attempt to provide some better security. But many people they're, they're saying even just today, I was on the street interviewing people and they're saying we don't even know where we're going to vote or who we're going to vote for. It's very confusing and very frustrating. And then of course, we have a large percent of the population that will be boycotting them, either for those reasons or for security, or because of the security situation, or because some of their religious leaders have dictated that they should boycott them.

Stuart Loory 03:32

Yeah, Dahr and 66 different slates. When you vote for a slate how many candidates are you voting for?

Dahr Jamail 03:42

Well, it varies on the list. The list vary from 83 to up to 275 candidates per list. Of course, most of them are anonymous. They they each candidate will represent a particular political party. These coalitions were formed in hopes of these people gaining more power by gaining a higher percentage of the votes, they'd have a more proportionate representation in the upcoming parliament. So that's why they were formed. But it is it's very confusing. These lists are huge. And so many Iraqis don't even know who some of these people are, or even who some of the parties are, which they represent.

Marty Schram 04:22

That's what I was gonna ask, Dahr. This is Marty Schram in Washington. And both of you and Maggy, who's just returned recently from Iraq, I wonder what what do people know about about the parties and what they stand for? Are they going to be going to polls the polls to vote just because voting is a new experience in this sense, or because they want to support the X party, the Y party, the Z party, whatever. Do they know? Dar?

Dahr Jamail 04:53

Well, it's it's really a mixed answer. It's a bit of both. I could say some are clear, like, yes, I want to vote for Allawi because I feel that he's brave and courageous and that he can help bring security here. But most people do really not have an understanding of even the full process. So many people feel that this is actually an election for a president, for prime minister, and they don't understand that this is just for a basically a temporary Parliament who will write the constitution.

Stuart Loory 05:25

Yeah, Dahr-

Dahr Jamail 05:26

There will be another referendum but so far there's much confusion.

Stuart Loory 05:30

Yeah, if if somebody wants to vote for Allawi, the the present Prime Minister, how many other people are being voted for?

Dahr Jamail 05:41

I don't know the exact number of candidate other candidates representing political parties on his list, but as I as I did say that the smallest number of parties in, in a list is 83. So it would be at least 83 other parties that are represented.

Stuart Loory 05:56

Okay, so let's say Allawi is the the head of a ticket of 83 candidates. What percentage if he if he wins, and that I understand is open to question, but what percentage of the the new assembly will those 83 candidates be? How many people will be in the new assembly?

Dahr Jamail 06:18

The total number of people in the assembly is 275. There's 270 spots, 275 spots and those will be filled. It will depend on the proportion of the vote that he gets. The best that I understand this, I've been doing my best because there have been changes coming down the pike on this on a weekly basis, so the last information I had has an understanding that it will depend totally on the proportion of the votes that he gets. And then those the people on his list that they they will have to decide amongst themselves, I presume, as to which of them get into which the seats in the parliament. But they they as far as I understand that they wouldn't get if they are at three on his list, for example, they wouldn't get automatically 83 seats into the parliament because that would mean if a coalition of lists with the 275 parties were elected, they would get all of them and none of the others would, which is simply not the way the system is set up.

Stuart Loory 07:16

Maggy Zanger. You were in Iraq for a couple of years and you were training Iraqi journalists. What kind of training did you give them to cover this election?

Maggy Zanger 07:28

Well, actually, we we worked quite extensively training journalists for this particular election. We held conferences, I was not there, this happened right after I left, held conferences in in As Sulaymaniyah, in Arbil, and in Kirkuk. And as far as I know, because of the security situation, we did not give conferences in other parts of the country, which, again is typical of the problem there. We can work in certain parts. The Kurdish north is quite safe and secure. They're perhaps also, you know, the, the area with the, the most vigorous and, well, I would say perhaps the freest press or the most professional press, although that isn't saying much either. But, but they're actually a part of the country that least needs a lot of this kind of attention and special training, but it's the only place we can work right now. We also worked putting together a handbook to show to kind of lay out for journalists, you know, how to go about preparing for an election. How to maybe, you know, try to set up a some kind of filing system or database, getting you're, getting your correspondence in different areas, all the rules and regulations around the election, trying to get them to understand no one has covered an election before, outside of Kurdistan. They have in that area some experience, but not a whole lot either. So this is a very different kind of animal and, and it's it's hard for people to kind understand, first of all, how it all works, because it's quite as quite an alien animal to them. And then, and then secondly, how to go about covering it. And I'm not sure how successful really they have been in the rest of the country. I think the press has been quite, quite busy. But whether it's full of a lot of commentary reflecting their particular political position or whether it's really more accurate news coverage, I really can't tell. Dahr might have a better idea that how the local media in Baghdad has covered this election.

Stuart Loory 09:35

Dahr, why don't you go into that?

Dahr Jamail 09:38

Yes, it's it has been basically the the news channels on the television as well as the newspapers are full of the coverage. And from what I've seen, I of course, only read what is already been translated into English and then what my interpreter will read for me as we look through them, which we try to do each day and it's basically been very biased recording of course, depending on which party for example, is publishing the newspaper, or, or which television station we watch, as you know, some of them are Sunni station, some of them are Shia station, some are Kurdish. So it has been extremely biased in in, you know, depending on which publication you read. It's full of campaign advertisements for certain political parties or lists. So it definitely has been biased coverage from what I've seen.

Marty Schram 10:31

You know, Stuart, this is Marty Schramm in Washington. It listening to what Dahr's saying it sort of reminds me about the way journalism started in the United States. In the early decades of this country, where the news media was indeed representing one party or another party, and coverage was expected to be biased. Somehow we survived it'll be interesting and and developed and matured democratically. It'll be interesting to see whether Iraq can survive that sort of coverage and still come out with with a functioning democracy.

Stuart Loory 11:10

What does the Bush administration expect? They, it, of course, expects that Iraq will survive and prosper. But do they have any real assessment beyond their public statements?

Marty Schram 11:24

Well, what's happening now is is sort of a frenzied activity emanating right out of the West Wing of the White House. Everybody seems to have a shovel and seems to be digging frantically trying to lower expectations. They're uhhh talking about how there is no sure fire result that is expected and even George Bush when he when he said, "I anticipate a grand moment in Iraqi history", talking about the elections, he went on to make clear that, that it's a grand moment that guarantees no certain outcome or result. It's just grant that it happens. They're trying so hard to lower expectations because they don't have a clue about what's going to happen on election day. Will there be lots of bloodshed? Will people many by the by the scores and, and even more perhaps died because they're trying to stand in line to vote? Will? Will there be a good vote? Will there be a good turnout? What is a good turnout? We get 50% turnout in the United States. And we think that's pretty good in other countries around the world that you can get 70%, 80%, 90% and and that's just the way it works. I don't know what constitutes a good turnout or a good outcome other than the fact that after election day, maybe the President will be able to say the election happened.

Stuart Loory 12:50

What? Is the administration backing any particular slate or party or candidate? Is it backing Prime Minister Allawi?

Marty Schram 13:04

They certainly would like to see Allawi do very well, of course. But I'd be interested from both Maggy and Dahr as to, as to whether they've seen any indications there in Iraq that the United States was in any way backing one slate or another. I think they've got their hands full just trying to to try to keep what passes for peace and in Iraq these days. I don't think they're able to do too much but I wonder what they are other colleagues think.

Stuart Loory 13:36

What passes for peace? That's a that's not very much these days, is it?

Marty Schram 13:43

It's It's war, blood and death passes for peace these days in too much of the areas they're in at least four provinces.

Stuart Loory 13:51

Yeah. Maggy, do you have any feeling for whether or not the United States is backing any particular candidate or slate?

Maggy Zanger 13:58

I don't think they are in particular. I think since the CPA has has withdrawn

Stuart Loory 14:05

CPA being the coalition-

Maggy Zanger 14:06

The Coalition Provisional Authority, which was basically the the very heavy US presence there. My sense is is that that they have withdrawn a bit, although I think, since I've been in in Kurdistan, and then in the US, Dahr might know better about that. But I think I think the US just needs elections to take place. And and I think the Iraqis do, too. I think we can be quite cynical about this. But I think we should also be clear that the Iraqi people do want to vote, they do want elections, they do want to participate. And there are great parts of the country that are not, you know, bathed in blood. There are parts that really are quite peaceful and it is possible to hold these elections. So I think, you know, it's easy to to wash the entire country with the same brush and I think it's very easy for we as Americans to be cynical about an election. But, But I think however this turns out, I do think it is symbolically significant in some ways. I've always thought it was a bit too early, but, but that being I do think it's it's important that it's it's happening at all. But I would like to hear from Dahr about whether or not he feels that that the US is on the ground in Iraq kind of backing any, any one slate.

Stuart Loory 15:17

Okay, we'll hear from Dahr in just a second. But first, I have to say you're listening to Global Journalist on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory. You may listen to this program- Excuse me Dahr- I just want to say that you may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to www.globaljournalists.org or here in mid Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. By the way, we now have a forum working on our website where all of our listeners can tune in and make comments easily or discuss the program with other listeners or with our staff. Now Dahr, tell us what you can about American involvement.

Dahr Jamail 16:06

Well, I certainly have not seen any direct American involvement with backing Allawi or any other list for that matter, but it there is very strong suspicion amongst the Iraqis about the backing of Allawi simply because he has essentially acted as a very good spokesperson for Bush during his time as the interim Prime Minister and essentially followed the Bush policy here on down the line and there is great and an animosity towards him amongst a large percentage of the population. But at the same time, I have spoken with a good number of people who do intend to vote for his list even despite the confusion. Some people think, give me the number for his list. That is, in fact the wrong number, but I assume they'll figure that out when they go to vote, but there has not been any overt backing of him. But at the same time, looking at Allawi in his ties with the CIA and his historical links with the US. Many people are very suspect that there may well be some goings on in the background, if you will.

Stuart Loory 17:13

When you say the number for his list, you're not talking about the number of candidates on the list, but you're talking about the number on the ballot that represents Allawi's list. Is that correct?

Dahr Jamail 17:25

Exactly. Because in the campaign posters and the advertisements on the television and things like this, they flash the name of a candidate, the name of a list and then they'll have the number of the list there. Like, please vote for 52 or whatever it may be.

Stuart Loory 17:41

Okay, the the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is the leader of the the Shia in Iraq, talks about voting for 169 apparently, that's the number of the list that uh the leading Shiites, um, approve of. How well is this list going to do? Is, is it going to win, do you think?

Dahr Jamail 18:10

Is that for me?

Stuart Loory 18:11

Yeah. Dahr.

Dahr Jamail 18:12

Oh, sorry. Yeah. It's essentially looking at just the sheer numbers and the coalition that they have assembled. I believe it's Hakim who's leading that list. And it's Zadari did issue a fatwa that basically instructed all of his followers to vote or they'll go to hell. And they are definitely the most determined to vote of all the Iraqis I speak with. And with the numbers, and if it is a legitimate election, then one would presume that this party would most likely get the most votes.

Marty Schram 18:45

Stuart, this is Marty Schramm in Washington. It occurs to me that one of the interesting things to ponder is what will be happening after the elections, however they turn out. One can estimate and guess that there'll be a good turnout in the Kurdish area, then certainly in the Shia areas. And let's just presume that things could be very difficult about completing elections in an orderly manner in many parts of the of the provinces where the Sunnis are strongest. If that's the case, there'll be this constitutional convention. Will the other parties wind up saying, look, we're going to have to appoint Sunni representatives to be delegates in in a sufficient number to, to assure that they will be represented? So that there can be a National Constitution that reflects their views as well?

Stuart Loory 19:45

Yeah, I think there has already been some talk of that hasn't there? Maggy, do you want to comment on that?

Maggy Zanger 19:53

I think that would be quite unusual. I guess it's possible but it's the interim assembly that is supposed to come up with this constitution, and then it will be put to referendum by all the people. So everyone will be able to weigh in on whether they want the constitution or not. I guess if there's a separate constitutional convention that you could appoint, Sunni's to it, although-

Marty Schram 20:23

The point I was raising Maggy is that if, if, if, in four provinces, many people elections just didn't happen or could not be completed because of the violence that happens, if indeed that is what happens-

Stuart Loory 20:38

We're talking mostly about the so called Sunni triangle here.

Maggy Zanger 20:42

Right. Yeah.

Marty Schram 20:43

Then the question, the question is, can you have a constitution that is supposed to represent the entire nation? Or will it be so challenged that you'll have civil war if you don't, if you don't do what I was talking about, what others have talked about in Iraq?

Maggy Zanger 21:02

Well, I don't know. I think, I've always felt this talk of civil war is quite over, over bloated. I don't think- What we have among the Sunni is an insurgency, what you don't have is a particularly popular uprising. You could say you don't have this against, against the rest of the country. I mean, if you have the Shia and the Kurds on board, you're representing 80% of the country, which is a pretty, pretty large part of the country and I'm not sure how far you can go to assuage Sunni, Sunni fears when there's this level of violence coming out of that part of the country. I just kind of think they may be left behind this time and and that's how it's going to be. Perhaps not right and not fair, but I don't I don't see much other way around it. You can, you can bend over backwards to include Sunni and Sunni people and they may have to take some kind of extreme measures. But it seems to me you're going to have an assembly that represents a very large portion of the country. And so there will be a referendum on this.

Marty Schram 22:08

Yes, I was just going to say, including all those, the vast majority of the Sunnis who are a distinct minority of the population, but who are not insurgents, don't back the insurgents wanted to vote, and wanted to push toward some form of democracy, and can't- are prevented by violence.

Maggy Zanger 22:28

Yeah, no, I agree. No, that is a problem.

Stuart Loory 22:31

I think, I think Dahr had something he wanted to say. I heard his voice in the background there. Did I hear you Dahr? I think we have lost Dahr Jamail.

Maggy Zanger 22:45

We heard him say goodbye. In Baghdad fashion with the line being cut.

Stuart Loory 22:51

Right. If I may, I would like to ask you Maggy what you know about Prime Minister Allawi. An article in The New Yorker this week calls him "Saddam light". And it charges among other things that when he was working in the new Ba'athist regime, he himself executed six people. Shot them in the head. What can you tell us about him?

Maggy Zanger 23:22

Well, I think I haven't read this article yet, but I'm quite looking forward to it. I do he is cut of the same cloth. I think he does come out of that Ba'athist tradition. And I think that that he is perhaps a bit more secular, perhaps a bit more open minded and therefore a bit more palatable than then some other candidates might be, particularly in the eyes of the US government. But I don't think we should delude

ourselves that that he's you know, he's he's no Nelson Mandela, that's for sure. I do think he is cut of the Ba'athist cloth. And I think that dies hard. And we've, just, just let me add one thing. I've seen the way he handled the media and the media commission. And it made me understand that his mind is very much along the lines of the Ba'athist. I mean, he wants to set up a Ministry of Information, not a free and independent media commission. So I don't think we should delude ourselves that this is a great Democrat.

Stuart Loory 24:24

If there were a more traditional Shia backed government. Presumably, it would be the same way, wouldn't it?

Maggy Zanger 24:34

Well, this is the quandary isn't it? Because on the other hand, and that's why people like Allawi do appeal to those who want to see a democratic, free, open minded government, the Shia, you do run a risk of the institution of Sharia law, which believe me will not sit well with with great parts of the country, the Kurds in particular. Although, the Shia have said they won't do that, and they won't impose religious leaders, and they've been quite, I think, quite good about, about all of this and have been quite moderate, quite understanding about the rest of the country uh so far. And they've shown, I think, a lot of political maturity, given the fact that they've been such an oppressed group for so long. There is a risk with the Shia, but there are also many people among the Shia, who are very well educated, who are, who are very open minded, who are very forward thinking. And I don't think we need to automatically fear a Shia dominated government. It really depends on the personalities that that move to the floor.

Stuart Loory 25:41

The the Grand Ayatollah Sistani has said that he likes to separate religion from government. Is that really the case?

Maggy Zanger 25:55

Well, it's hard to say. I mean, certainly he has been very involved. And this was in government and in politics in the country so far. I mean, he comes from what they call the, the quiet hausa. I mean, his position is not supposed to be a particularly vocal or active role and and it wasn't until quite recently. But part of this was also the fault of the Governing Council and the other Iraqis, who kept making these, these trips to talk to Sistani and to get his blessing and his okay on this and that and the other thing, so they almost made him and and Bremer, in fact, the Coalition Provisional Authority representatives there, saw him as a very natural leader. And he is a religious leader, and that does give him great sway in the Shia community, that is really quite, quite important. Whether he will, will step back now with the, with the Shia government and and withdraw, I don't know. There are a lot of advisors around him who, who have both kind of Ba'athist background and who have connections to, to Iran. But, but I think it remains to be seen. And I think this will be quite crucial the kind of role, so far he's actually played a fairly moderating role. So again, I don't think we necessarily need to need to fear. We'll just have to wait and see how it all plays out.

Stuart Loory 27:19

Okay, Maggy, I'm sorry, I do have to cut you off. As a close, let me only say that the beginnings of a movement toward democracy in the Arab nations of the world is certainly something that we want to strive for. But it's hard to see how the policies in Iraq of the Bush administration can really be such a beginning. Maybe next week, we'll have a different take. Let's hope so. Our guests today have been in Baghdad, Dahr Jamail an independent journalist, in Tucson Arizona, Professor Maggy Zanger of the University of Arizona Journalism School, and in Washington, my old friend Martin Schramm of the

Scripts Howard Newspaper Alliance. Our director is Pat Akers, our producers Won Tak Han (ph?), Renata Johnson, Stefanie von Brochowski, and Pavreetta Sarah George (ph?). For all, I'm Stuart Loory. Global Journalist. We'll be back next week.