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Rushing Iraq Elections Not Worth Potential Costs, Says IWU Political Scientist

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — The potential costs of getting Iraq's first democratic election wrong are not worth rushing the process, says an Illinois Wesleyan political scientist with experience as an election monitor for The Carter Center.

Frank Boyd, associate professor of political science at Illinois Wesleyan, questions whether successful elections can be held in Iraq by the end of January as currently scheduled even under the best conditions, let alone amid the violence that has plagued many areas of the country.

"It might be possible to establish an electoral process for Iraq by January, but the question of whether there can be elections in Iraq within five months depends upon what you intend those elections to be," said Boyd, who has observed elections in several South American countries.

"Founding elections are critically important for democratizing societies," Boyd added. "It establishes a legitimate forum for adjudicating political disputes. If the electoral process is not established in a way that all major stakeholders believe is free and fair, the Iraqi people will pay an enormous cost. In simple terms, if you get it wrong the first time, the re-do is much, much more difficult."

Boyd says the time necessary to establish an electoral process from scratch should not be underestimated. "Democratic elections are multi-step processes that require many months of planning, especially in a country that has no electoral infrastructure," Boyd said.

The first two steps, Boyd says, are developing a registration process that results in an acceptable voters' list. That list may not be perfect, but it must be a list that everyone agrees is an unbiased reflection of the voting population. Once that list is established and agreed upon — a process that can take months or even years in the best of conditions — electoral officials must train poll workers and negotiate the logistics of the polling sites and the vote count.

"Any holes in those logistics can be exploited by political actors who have no interest in allowing a free and fair vote, but who instead are motivated to identify flaws in the process and de-legitimize the election's results," Boyd said. "When political parties sign off on the procedures for registration and voting, they can only protest the counting of the vote. Challenges to the counting process, however, must contend with international observers who observe all stages of the vote and the count, making electoral fraud much more difficult."

Compared with some elections that Boyd has observed, in countries like Panama, where there was some history of democracy, the proposed Iraqi elections pose greater challenges. "The Iraqi people have no history of voting in a democracy," said Boyd. "This is an opportunity to introduce them to a totally different system of governance that will reflect the will of the Iraqi people. We cannot afford to get this election wrong."

To discuss the Iraqi elections with Boyd, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.