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Op-Ed Contributor

Voting 'Yes' to Chaos

By HATEM MUKHLIS

Baghdad

THE usually bustling streets of this city looked sad and empty on Saturday, other than the occasional herd of people on their way to the voting stations. The children - I never knew there were so many youngsters in Baghdad - oblivious to the event of the day, took to the streets, affirming their newly found democracy by playing soccer.

I knew for sure, alas, that this constitution would not unify the country. My mother once told me - I was 10 at the time - that her father, one of the founders of modern Iraq, had lamented how important, yet impossible, it was to even dream about unifying the national Iraqi attire, let alone our country's hearts.

It is extremely unfortunate that so many people were led to believe that the Iraqi constitution would be a panacea. This document, which early returns indicate is likely to be approved by voters, is nothing more or less than a time bomb.

Why have so many Sunnis so adamantly opposed it? The answer is easy: it would likely divide Iraq into as many as 18 small feuding states. Can anyone imagine every state in the American union having diplomatic representation in foreign missions?

It is a tacit understanding in every civilized state that the whole country joins together to defend itself from an outside threat. But not under this Iraqi constitution; the state Parliaments would probably have to approve. In case after case, provincial regulations would overrule federal laws when there is a dispute. The Iraqi Army would not even have the right to enter a state without the approval of that state's Parliament.

Anyone who thinks that such a constitution would calm the insurgency has probably been spending more time than he should have reading about Alice in Wonderland. I believe that should the constitution pass, the next few weeks will see an escalation of the unnecessary violence that has ripped my country apart. Unnecessary, because the ordinary citizen has no political agenda, and has found himself amid a war he neither understands nor cares about - a war waged by foreigners who could not care less about Iraq or Iraqis. All he seeks is the most basic necessities of life: electricity, security, a job, food, health care, clean water and working sewers.

The constitution was written with the interest of only one group in mind: the Kurds. The Shiites seem to think they can shape the country to their wishes if only they can appease the Kurds and gain their cooperation. But the Kurds have their own plan: their ultimate goal is to form an independent state of Kurdistan, with or without Iraq's help. Even now a "greater Kurdistan," which would absorb Kurdish areas of neighboring countries, is in the cooking.

The so-called concessions over future amendments to the document, given to assuage Sunni

concerns last week, were really part of a well-calculated strategic plan with no risks to the Kurds whatsoever.

The idea is that the constitution, if approved, will take effect immediately, while an impotent committee argues for four months about how to make amendments to a poison that has already started dividing the country. A few futile changes would be made to appease the Sunni public, and we will have another referendum on them. Then the final knockout will come, with two-thirds of the voters in the three provinces that comprise Kurdistan voting the amendments down, and blaming the Sunnis for breaking apart the country.

The paradox is that despite the de-Baathification efforts under way, we are doing exactly what the Baath Party always did: we have simply changed "execute and then argue" to "do what you are told and discuss it later."

It is obvious that the Iraqi Islamic Party, a leading Sunni coalition, was given great assurances by Shiite leaders and American officials last week before it advocated a "yes" vote. The party officials apparently believed they could fool the masses with their rhetoric. They have actually shot themselves in the foot (and time will prove to the Americans that a weak ally is a burden rather than a help).

No matter how the vote ends up, the constitution will eventually be thrown into an open fire. This fire is spontaneously combusting across the nation right now, and it will burn the green and the dry.

Rather than unifying Iraqis, this constitution would only increase the rift between our ethnic and religious groups. It could also lead to the Balkanization of the nation, as the 18 states coalesce into three superstates, with the Sunnis trapped between Shiites to the south and Kurds to the north. Hatred toward those Iraqis who returned to Iraq on the backs of the American tanks will be nurtured. Inevitably this would lead to more hatred towards the United States, since even though it is the American troops that are preserving Iraq's unity, it was the invasion that has led to this chaos.

I, and millions of other Iraqis, Sunnis and Shiites, sincerely hope that this constitution has been voted down. The next National Assembly is going to be of a much more democratic composition, and would be well suited for writing a more effective constitution, one that would better reflect the patriotic desires of all Iraqis. This would also give the Sunnis who now have taken the political path a sign that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

But if the constitution has been passed, many more Iraqis are going to feel that no matter what they do in the political sphere, it would not make a difference, and that the only way out of this is to take up armed struggle.

In any case, after the votes have been counted, a constitution is only a piece of paper. Even if the country does not fly apart because of it, or we get a better one down the road, there are many steps that need to be taken if we are going to achieve any sort of political stability. First, we need a new government whose officials are in power based on qualifications rather than loyalty to a certain sect, political party or ethnic group. This government needs to give the ordinary Iraqi a tangible positive change: better electricity; more jobs; more security.

We must also reassemble the Iraqi Army and disband all ethnic and religious militias; and this military must end the current wave of reprisals against those who fought on the Iraqi side in the Iran-Iraq war.

In addition, we have to re-establish the judicial system that Iraq had before it was corrupted by the

Baathists. Last, we need to control the graft that pervades every level of government, and gain better control of the economy, including fashioning a system that shares the nation's oil wealth with all citizens.

As Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, "The Americans will always do the right thing - after they've exhausted all the alternatives." Let's hope that this will prove to be true about Iraq; it is the only way to avoid converting the liberation of Iraq into an Iraqnam.

Hatem Mukhlis, a doctor, is the chief executive of the Iraq National Movement, a Sunni political party.