

The Iraqi Elections and the Assyrian Apathy

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I have been waiting eagerly for the weekend of January 22 and 23 so that I could do my patriotic duty as an Assyrian. On January 20, I felt miserable, I was coughing, had bad headache and nasal congestion, and all my bones were ailing. I visited the emergency room, the doctor told me that I had the flu and that I needed to rest, get a lot of fluids and drink my soup.

On Saturday morning, January 22, my body was begging me to remain in bed; however, my soul kept pushing me to get up and help my people in Iraq through my voting. My sister and brother-in-law were energetic as usual and kept encouraging me to remember the reasons why we were making the long trip. At 11:00 a.m., we began our 7 hours drive from Northern California to Irvine in Southern California in order to register for the Iraqi Elections as expatriate Iraqi Assyrians. I sat in the back, did not speak throughout the journey, and kept my mouth covered because I did not want my sister or brother-in-law catch my flu.

We finally arrived at the given address for the registration center in Irvine around 6:00 p.m. and we were unhappy from what we witnessed first. We have to go into somewhat a deserted area, where many police and security personnel were welcoming the visitors at a somehow dark entrance gate. A search of the vehicle and luggage ensued upon our arrival, which we did not mind of course considering the security situation. Next, we drove through a dark path towards a poorly lit parking lot, which was using a generator to produce the source of lighting. Along that short dark path, a security person with torchlight directed us first to where he was standing and then towards that improperly lit parking lot. He advised us where to park and what we were permitted to carry with us inside the building. He told us that cameras were not allowed inside even though we were so excited to record that historic moment. Next, we went through another personal security check gate. Inside the building, there was electricity and everybody was courteous. We were then directed to the appropriate table, where we presented our IDs and the necessary documents and then each one of us was given a card to use the week after when we returned for voting. We hanged around for about an hour and during that whole hour only one couple went through the process, our own Mr. and Mrs. Firas Jatou.

I asked one of the officials about the turnout. I was told that it was very low. I was very saddened because I thought that I would see many Assyrians (ChaldoAssyrians) taking part in this historic event. The more I absorbed the words of that official the more my feelings of illness due to the flu turned slowly to anger and disgust. On our way back to our aunt's home to stay the night, I wanted to cry. I tried to discredit that official. I visited later the official site for the Iraq Out-of-Country Voting Program and found out that the total registered people in Chicago was around 5,550 in eight days; in Los Angeles around 3,730 (many could be Arabs as the official stated); and in Detroit 9,000 (many could be Arabs). I looked at the Nashville figures (where Kurds are concentrated), and the chart showed that around 3,800 people have registered. This represents perhaps the maximum figure for eligible Kurds, i.e. every single eligible Kurd in Nashville did register. Where is the voice of the Assyrian, Chaldean, ChaldoAssyrian, Suryani, Arami, Syriac, or any other damn name and title we carry?

Why are the Assyrians so insensible and hardhearted towards issues that are so vital to their future? Where are the Assyrian civic institutions? How many of them have printed leaflets or reminders and sent them to their members asking them to do their civic duties? Where is the Assyrian American National Federation (AANF) and its 30 something club members? Mr. Aladin Khamis in his first message as a president of AANF, posted in the latest Assyrian Star (Fall 2004), spoke of being active, increase its reach, and broaden its vision since this is it; and that the time was now. I ask, what was that about? How many political and civic groups have encouraged their members to register? How many political or religious leaders went on radio or TV shows and talked about how important it was to register and vote?

Raabi William Daniel said once: "we are a nation in apathy." There is no better way to describe this pathetic situation.

Mar Dinkha, the Patriarch of the Church of the East, is making another of his leisurely tours to California these days, as if his people are not involved in the most important elections of their modern history. The patriarch seems to be numbed and refuses to even talk about the elections. He seems to be living in a different world and not in the same world his people are living in. He seems to be living in a beautiful dream while his people in Iraq are fighting for their place in future Iraq, the land of their ancestors. The patriarch had stated that the church must not be involved in politics. However, the fact is that the church of the Assyrians is involved in politics since its bishops and priests continue to issue statements that are nothing but political. Certain priests make frequent calls to certain Assyrian TV stations and in the most uncivil manner degrade certain Assyrian political leaders, praise others, take sides, and ask people to vote for one particular group and not the other. If not being involved in politics is the policy of the Church of the East, shouldn't those who break the policy be reprimanded?

The second thing is that encouraging people to vote does not necessarily mean that one is involved in politics; voting is a civic duty and in this case it is to benefit Iraq as a whole. We are not asking the patriarch to ask the people to vote for one particular groups and not the other. We are not asking the patriarch to act similar to other religious leaders in the Middle East. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calls the Iraqi voting a holy religious duty for all Shi'ites to perform. Coptic Patriarch Pope Shenouda III went to St Bishoy Monastery to protest Muslim discrimination against his people. He remained in seclusion until the Egyptian government promised to address the problem and find a solution that his conscious could accept. His Beatitude, Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, has been the most vocal against the Syrian occupation of his country and continues to remind his people in many of his Sunday mass sermons and addresses about their right for a sovereign Lebanon. All we are saying is that the patriarch should encourage the people to vote. The people need sometimes that push and motivation, that is all.

Furthermore, I could understand (but still would not accept it) if an Assyrian lived in San Francisco and found it unbearable to travel to Irvine twice in the span of 7 or 10 days in order to register and then to vote. What is the excuse of those living in Los Angeles and San Diego who are at most an hour or an hour and a half away? Where are the eligible voters from the 80,000 Assyrians in Chicago? What happened to this damned nation? Some one said to me today that it is obvious that the two-year bad mouthing propaganda of Bet Nahrain Inc. affiliate AssyriaSat and the continuous attacks of one Assyrian group against another and their non-unity have driven average Assyrians away and that Assyrians are simply tired of everything relating to politics. If that is the case, I pity this nation for allowing losers to discourage them from doing the perhaps the one right thing that we had to do in our modern times.

Let me say finally that I hold every person who holds a leadership position in the Diaspora (whether civic, political, or religious) responsible for this complete failure and collapse in the registration and thus voting process. Let history record that these so-called leaders failed in performing the minimum requirement of their position when it was needed the most.