

ELECTIONWATCH

IRAQ



Iraq Post-Election Watch: March 2010 Parliamentary Elections

On March 7 Iraqis turned out in huge numbers to participate in their country's second parliamentary election since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. With a voter turnout of approximately 62 percent, Iraqis defied insurgent violence on Election Day to provide a decisive validation of the country's democratic system. Of particular importance is the participation of the dissatisfied and insurgency-plagued Sunni population which largely boycotted the first parliamentary elections in 2005. In 2010 Sunni-majority provinces produced some of the highest turnout rates in the country.

The System

Iraq's 325-seat parliament was elected according to an open-list system among provincial level constituencies. This means that national parties and coalitions fielded individual slates of candidates in each of Iraq's 18 provinces, and, unlike the closed-list system of 2005, Iraqi voters were able to cast their vote directly for a specific representative. Any surplus votes received by a candidate above the threshold required to win a seat transferred to the next candidate in his or her party. There is also a 25 percent quota for women candidates, so every fourth candidate on each was a female. Further small quotas are set for Christian, Shabak, Sabeen, and Yazidi religious minorities in certain provinces.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results show that Iraqis have elected a complex variety of political parties and coalitions. After a neck-and-neck race through the partial results, on Friday March 26 it was announced that former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and his Iraqia coalition had narrowly defeated incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's State of Law Coalition.

Beyond the race between Maliki and Allawi, other national results point to interesting trends in Iraqi politics. In the north, the Kurdistan Alliance, made-up of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), predictably won in Kurdish-majority provinces.

However, continuing from the Kurdistan Parliament elections last year, the Change List and its opposition allies split the vote in the traditional PUK stronghold of Sulimaniyah province. Running on a well-delivered platform calling to account a non-transparent and inefficient Kurdish government, the Change List has challenged the traditional monopoly enjoyed in the north by the KDP-PUK alliance, possibly weakening the PUK as a dominant political force.

In the Shia-majority south, the greatest competition was between Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a grouping of pro-Iranian,

religiously conservative Shia parties, including the violently anti-American Moqtada al Sadr. Much of Sadr's populist support among Shia poor is historically hidden in undecided voters, and the INA performed unexpectedly well, winning two southern provinces outright and capturing enough of a minority elsewhere to pull a strong third-place showing nationally.

In Anbar and other regions in the Sunni heartland, voters overwhelmingly threw support behind Allawi's Iraqia coalition. Although Ayad Allawi himself is a secular Shia, and drew some support from urban and educated populations, the majority of his support came from the Sunni members of his coalition, including the nationalist Arab al Hadba list of Ninewa province and Saleh al Mutlaq's National Dialogue Front.

In a controversial pre-election decision by the Iraqi government, Mutlaq had been personally barred from candidacy for his Baathist ties, and there was great concern that his Sunni base would subsequently stay home on Election Day; however, they turned out in droves, with Sunni-majority provinces registering some of the highest rates of voter turnout. Interestingly, Sunni voters largely neglected the powerful tribal sheikhs that dominated the provincial council elections of January 2009, and who featured so importantly in the 2006-2007 surge, appearing to prefer the more national and inclusive alliance of Ayad Allawi over local tribal figures.

Next: Coalition Building and a New Prime Minister

What follows is a prolonged period of coalition-building towards a majority government. The Iraqi Constitution lays out a months-long process in which first the new parliament convenes to elect a President, a largely ceremonial post but whose selection can itself be a bitter and protracted struggle, followed by the new President asking the leader of the largest bloc in parliament to form a government.

After the 2005 elections it took nearly six months for a governing coalition to be formed and a Prime Minister to be selected, during which period sectarian violence in the country spiraled out of control. Although the full-blown civil war of the past is unlikely to repeat itself, simmering tensions between Sunni, Shia and Kurd may well explode into open violence during and after the coalition-forming period. If Sunnis are left out of the governing coalition, insurgent violence may well increase; if the Kurdish Alliance, itself weakened internally by the Change List is left, out Kurd-Arab tensions in the disputed territories may turn violent. If Moqtada al Sadr is left out, he may turn again to his powerful militia to demonstrate his importance and power.

Although Iraqis' embrace of democracy was evident on March 7, considerable political dangers will continue to face the country throughout this year.

IRI in Iraq

Since the summer of 2003, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has worked with political parties, civil society groups and government officials and their staff as they transition Iraq to a fully-functioning democracy. Through trainings, public opinion research and technical advice, IRI assists its Iraqi partners to develop issue-based political platforms, issue advocacy campaigns, and public policy that address the concerns of the country's

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