

# ELECTIONWATCH

## IRAQ



### Iraq Pre-Election Watch: March 2010 Parliamentary Elections

On March 7, 2010, Iraq will hold its parliamentary elections for all 325 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives. The elections will be based on an open ballot list electoral system, with voters able to choose either a party in general, or a specific candidate within a party. More than 6,170 candidates are vying for the support of almost 19 million registered voters, as well as out-of-country voters in 16 different countries.

### Political Environment

The election for the Iraqi Council of Representatives was originally expected to be held in January 2010, but was delayed by disputes between various political factions in parliament over the election law. The main issues were whether to use an open or closed ballot list electoral system, the allocation of seats in parliament and the voting in disputed territories of Iraq. The main division fell along sectarian lines, with both minority Sunni and Kurdish blocs disputing the allocation of reserved parliamentary seats, which favors the majority Shia population. After a protracted debate, a compromise agreement was finally reached resulting in an increased number of parliamentary seats, from 275 to 325, and an open list system.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections a closed list system was used, providing Iraqis fewer options in their political representation. Under the closed list system, in which parties determine which of their candidates are allowed to take allocated seats, Iraqi politics were dominated by a small group of party bosses and powerful personalities. Under an open list system, Iraqi political parties have had to realign their organizations to draw strength from frontline candidates and field offices, rather than the national leadership in Baghdad, to communicate with voters presented with more political options.

In January 2010, the Iraqi de-Baathification commission, formally known as the Justice and Accountability Commission, disqualified hundreds of candidates from participating in the March election due to alleged Baath Party ties. The ban most notably included Saleh al Mutlaq, a prominent Sunni politician whose party holds the second largest bloc of Sunni seats in parliament and is in an alliance with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a Shiite, and current Sunni Vice President Tareq al Hashemi. The ban was widely criticized by Sunnis, who viewed it as a political move by the Shiite-led government to marginalize them. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, a Shiite, voiced his support for the ban, further fueling Sunni suspicions.

Following the decision by the Iraqi de-Baathification commission, some banned candidates were replaced by their political parties while others contested the ban. In addition to the political establishment, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission and the Iraqi

judiciary also weighed in on the ban. In mid-February 2010, an Iraqi appeals panel issued a final ruling allowing less than 30 banned candidates to be reinstated and participate in the election. Among those still banned include Saleh al Mutlaq, who as of writing had announced that his party would participate in the elections without him.

Although political alliances continue to shift, the main political coalitions are as follows:

- Iraqi National Alliance, including major Shiite parties such as Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, Sadrist Current, National Reform Trend, and Salvation Councils;
- State of Law coalition, including Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki and Islamic Da'wah Party;
- Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiya), an alliance of secular Shiite parties and nationalist Sunnis including Vice President Tareq al Hashemi, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, Saleh al Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, and the Mosul-based Arab nationalist al Hadba party;
- Kurdistan Alliance, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan;
- Change List, campaigning independently of the Kurdistan Alliance; and
- Unity of Iraq Coalition, comprised of more than 40 political entities established by Minister of Interior Jawad Bolani, with Sheikh Abu Reesha of the Awakening Councils and Ahmed Ghafoor al Samara'i of the Iraqi Meethaq Gathering (Sunni Endowment).

## Challenges Facing Iraq

With U.S. troops withdrawn from major cities and remaining forces expected to depart Iraq by the end of 2011, the U.S. mission has already begun evolving from combat to supporting Iraqi security even as the ability of the Iraqi government to maintain security continues to be challenged. In the months preceding the election, an increasingly resurgent al Qaeda demonstrated its capability to disrupt the political process. A series of powerful, coordinated attacks have targeted government buildings in Baghdad, as well as hotels popular with international media and business officials, killing hundreds of people. In addition to the targeting of government facilities, there has been an increase in the number of political assassinations and cases of intimidation, part of a broader effort by insurgents to create a hostile election environment and make Iraq ungovernable as the U.S. military withdraws.

Besides physical security, Iraqis view corruption and lack of government transparency as rampant problems. Iraqis continue to voice concern over a lack of accountability of government entities and elected officials for their failure to provide basic services and security and to improve the lives of citizens. Additionally, there is increasing concern over the role of Iran in Iraq's emerging democracy. In recent remarks, General Ray Odierno, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq, and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Chris Hill criticized the leadership of the de-Baathification commission for being influenced by Iran.

Ultimately, one of the key accomplishments for Iraq has been the agreement by nearly all factions to participate in the 2010 election, in contrast to the contentious parliamentary elections of 2005 that were widely boycotted over fears of insurgent violence or in protest of U.S. involvement. With the potential for increasing sectarian violence and some Sunnis feeling disenfranchised by the candidate ban decision, the success of the 2010 national elections becomes even more critical for Iraq in continuing its path towards democracy.

## IRI in Iraq

Since 2003, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has worked with political parties, government officials and civil society organizations to promote the development of democracy in Iraq. Through trainings, technical assistance and public opinion research, IRI assists its Iraqi partners to develop issue-based political platforms, advocacy campaigns and public policy that address the concerns of Iraqi citizens.



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