

## Iraq after the Election: Transformation of the Political Landscape

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IRAQI PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION SURPRISES WITH UNEXPECTED ELECTION RESULTS AND LOW VOTER TURNOUT

**For the first time after the military defeat of the Islamic State (ISIL), national parliamentary elections were held in Iraq. Around 7,000 candidates, organized on 88 party lists, competed for 329 parliament seats in the election on May 12, 2018. When results are official, the new parliament will be appointed to form a new Iraqi government.**

### Low Voter Turnout

24.5 million Iraqis were eligible to vote in any one of the 8,000 constituencies across the country. Extra polling stations were installed in the refugee camps that hold around 2.5 million internally displaced people (IDP's). This year's elections marked the first year in which electrical voting cards that needed to be applied for in advance were introduced. This reform was implemented to speed up the election process and to minimize election fraud. It was also the first time that Iraqis abroad were able to take part in the elections.

On Election Day, polling stations were open from seven in the morning until six in the evening. Only members of the Armed Forces and the affiliated Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi) were allowed to cast their vote two days ahead of the official date, which they did with a turnout of 79 percent. Nationally, however, the turnout was considerably lower and only amounted to 44.5 percent, as the first official calculations of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) state. This result indicates that fewer Iraqis are exercising their right to vote than before (2014: 62 percent, 2010: 62.4 percent and 2005: 79.6 percent).

Iraqi experts assume that the turnout is in fact even lower and suggest that the official

result was adjusted in order to (1) guarantee the legitimacy of the newly elected parliament, and (2) secure the reputation of IHEC as the official election committee. According to government sources, the announced 44.5 percent refers only to the pre-registered 11.7 million voters but not to the actual number of 24.5 million eligible Iraqi voters.

This extremely low turnout can be traced back to the Iraqi youth's wide-spread disappointment with the country's political institutions and officials in Baghdad. Many Iraqis did not believe that their vote would make any difference in such a political landscape, dominated by nine sect-oriented political parties. This argument is further supported by the common perception that IHEC is not politically neutral, but instead controlled by said nine groups. In the run-up to the elections, IHEC made little effort to try to educate Iraqi citizens on the new election process or to raise their awareness about the upcoming elections. According to Iraqi experts, international campaigns on the relevance of the democratic process did not reach the population. Within the Shiite community, it is said that it was mainly government officials who voted, while turnout among the rural Shiite population was very low.

Additionally, organizational and technical failures, before and during the elections, impacted the turnout. It was reported that only 76 percent of the requested voter cards had been handed out prior to Election Day. Iraqi IDP's are especially said to have had problems registering and voting. On Election Day itself, a temporary curfew, as well as a temporary driving ban kept many voters from reaching the polls. The announced threat of the Islamic State targeting the election process is another likely

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reason why voters preferred to keep their distance from polling stations.

After five years of civil war and the fight against ISIL, this result symbolizes a major setback for Iraqi democracy. Exactly fifteen years after the fall of the Saddam regime, it seems as if large parts of the Iraqi population have turned their backs on their country's political institutions and officials in Baghdad. In light of the low turnout, the parliament and government's legitimacy and authority might not have enough support to implement urgently needed economic, administrative and security reforms.

### Security Situation on Election Day

Apart from a few incidents, the Election Day went relatively peacefully, with no major events with debilitating repercussions for the most part. The few incidents that did occur included shootings at a number of polling stations in the provinces of Basrah, Salah Al-Din and Diyala, and a rocket fired at one station in the province of Anbar. In Najaf, the religious center of the Iraqi Shiite community, a polling station was closed down due to quarrels. Still, none of these incidents led to serious consequences or effects on the election process. In the Kirkuk province, however, an explosion on Election Day resulted in six fatalities.

Due to the security situation, all Iraqi airports and their flight operations were shut down on Election Day. Across the country, only vehicles authorized by IHEC were allowed on the streets. These restrictions were then lifted during the day, as the security situation was assessed as stable.

Despite announcements prior to the election, no ISIL attacks targeting the polling stations were reported on Election Day. One year after the retake of ISIL's stronghold Mosul by the Iraqi forces, this lack of action shows the terror group's limited capacity to carry out complex operations. Also, it highlights the achievements of the Iraqi security forces, who were able to establish a stable security regime. Especially in the border region to Syria and the areas surrounding Kirkuk and Mosul, many ISIL-terror cells remain present and pose a future threat to the country.

### Withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal with Iran

The USA's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA) did not significantly affect the Iraqis' voting behavior. The regional power struggles and the international interferences in Baghdad might, on the other hand, play a bigger role. The acting Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, is known to be a proponent of the international (military) engagement in Iraq, having so far been able to balance the interest of Tehran, Riyadh and Washington. His strongest competitors, Hadi Al-Ameri and Nuri Al-Maliki, on the other hand, are considered to be advocates of the Iranian interest and opposed to a long-term engagement of the USA. Considering these different political positions and the currently escalating tension between the USA and Iran, the formation of a unified government appears difficult at this time. Between 2004 and 2008, the Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr – whose political movement seems to be the winner of the elections, given the preliminary results – was fighting the US forces in Iraq with his militia, the Mahdi brigade. Most recently, however, he and his *Sairon* list opened up to the USA and Saudi Arabia, which could turn the list into a balanced consensus party. If it comes to a conflict between Iran and the USA after withdrawing from the JCPOA and fighting ISIL, it will be difficult for Iraq especially, to not be drawn into it.

### Irregularities

It has been reported that incidents of fraud that likely influenced the election outcome and might delay the government formation process took place across the country. In Baghdad and the southern provinces, armed militiamen are said to have directly exerted influence on the decision of voters in polling stations through their presence near voters at the stations.

Other cases report exchanges of ballot papers for others after the election, causing a different result. Especially in the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk, many such incidences have been reported. Voters all across the country have already submitted complaints against the preliminary results, even though Prime Minister Al-Abadi has called on them

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to accept the votes and respect the new power balance. Up until now, it is unclear when the revision of all complaints will be completed to announce the final results. The Iraqi constitution does not define a deadline after which no more complaints may be turned in.

### Formation of a New Government

Only after the final results are announced by IHEC and confirmed by the Supreme Court can a new government begin to form. It is currently assumed that the complaint procedure will not be completed before the end of the fasting month of Ramadan (June 15, 2018), which means the ratification of the results by the Supreme Court can only be initiated in the second half of the year. It will be within a timeframe of 15 days after that that the President of Iraq, Fuad Masum, will call the parliament to session. In this first parliamentary session, a new Speaker of Parliament and two deputies will be elected with an absolute majority. In the same session, or another held within thirty days of the first, a new President will be elected, with a two-third majority. According to the constitutional tradition of Iraq, a Kurd will be elected President, a Sunni will take the position of Speaker of Parliament and a Shiite will become Prime Minister.

After the President is elected, he will give the mandate to form a new government to a representative of the largest party coalition. This representative then has 30 days to find a majority to form a cabinet. Every candidate needs to be individually confirmed by an absolute majority of the parliament. The process of forming a government usually takes a maximum of 90 days. This means that Iraq is likely to form a new government by mid-September 2018, considering the pending allegations of fraud. If the mandated representative is not able to form a government during the first 30 days or if it is not confirmed by the parliament, the President has 15 days to task another member with the formation. Again, the representative will have 30 days to form a cabinet. If the formation is successful the second time, Iraq will have a new government by November 2018. Otherwise, the process will be repeated.

### Preliminary Results

IHEC has published the preliminary election results on May 19. According to these results, Prime Minister Al-Abadi did not win any of the crucial constituencies, while Al-Sadr's *Sairoun* Movement and Al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance were successful in significant parts of the country. In predominantly Shiite Iraq, experts consider the Shiite provinces of the south to be the most important for the final outcome of the election. In these areas, Al-Sadr and Al-Ameri took the first ranks. Al-Abadi's Victory Alliance only won in the predominantly Sunni province of Ninawa that was destroyed by ISIL. On a national level, however, the current Prime Minister lags behind Al-Sadr and Al-Ameri.

For now, this implies that a new power balance has been established in the Iraqi parliament, bringing with it a long government-formation process with unclear results. Even in the past, the winners of the most votes or seats were not always able to form a majority government. The influence of external actors, especially the US and Iran, will also be crucial for the upcoming government formation process.

Preliminary results as of May 19, 2018:

| Lists / Parties                                 | Seats in Parliament |
|---|---------------------|
| <i>Sairoun</i> -Movement (Muqtada Al-Sadr)      | 54 seats            |
| <i>Conquest</i> -Alliance (Hadi Al-Ameri)       | 47 seats            |
| <i>Victory</i> -Alliance (Haider Al-Abadi)      | 42 seats            |
| <i>State of Law</i> -Coalition (Nuri Al-Maliki) | 26 seats            |
| Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP)             | 25 seats            |
| <i>Al-Wataniya</i> (Ayad Allawi)                | 21 seats            |
| <i>Hikma</i> -List (Ammar al-Hakim)             | 19 seats            |
| Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)              | 18 seats            |