

Polls Give Iraq's Reformers the Advantage, the Vote May Be Theirs to Lose

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Brief Analysis

In Iraq, pre-election polls indicate likely difficulties for Tishreen protest movement to translate popular support into electoral gains, due to widespread concerns about electoral legitimacy and political violence.

This October will mark the two-year anniversary of Iraq's *Tishreen* protest movement that shook the country's political establishment, bringing down the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and compelling Baghdad to schedule early parliamentary elections. October is also when those elections are currently set to take place.

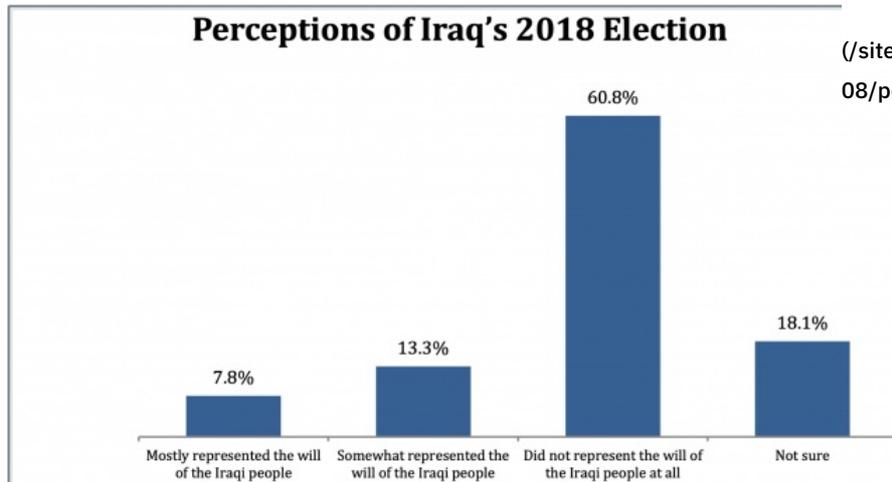
The movement and its supporters are demanding systemic reforms to address state-sanctioned corruption, rising unemployment—particularly among the country's youth majority—and a continuing lack of essential services. When government forces and militias loyal to Iran responded to the largely peaceful protests with excessive and lethal force, killing hundreds and wounding thousands, justice and accountability were added to their list of demands.

The question now is whether the Iraqis who turned out on the streets of Baghdad and cities across the south of the country almost two years ago will turn out in similarly large numbers on election day, currently scheduled for October 10. According to a nationwide public opinion survey conducted by the [Enabling Peace in Iraq Center \(https://enablingpeace.org/\)](https://enablingpeace.org/) (EPIC), candidates who win their support could have a commanding edge over their competition.

The survey was conducted in June 2021, a month after the assassination of prominent activist Ehab al-Wazni and within weeks of the [government's botched attempt \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-iran-militia-commander-freed/2021/06/09/b371c3a8-c903-11eb-8708-64991f2acf28_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-iran-militia-commander-freed/2021/06/09/b371c3a8-c903-11eb-8708-64991f2acf28_story.html) to bring his suspected killer, militia leader Qasim Muslih, to justice. EPIC conducted phone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,068 eligible Iraqi voters as respondents across Iraq's 18 provinces, with a 3% margin of error and 95% confidence level.

We found that a large percentage of respondents, slightly more than a third, plan to sit out the upcoming elections. Among possible reasons for this decision, trust in the legitimacy of elections as a pathway for political representation remains low. Contributing to that

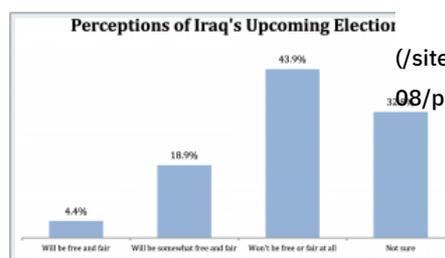
skepticism are the “[dangerous violations](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election-idUSKCN1J122B)” that mired the previous elections. Looking back, a clear majority of respondents, more than 60%, stated the belief that the 2018 election did not reflect the will of the people



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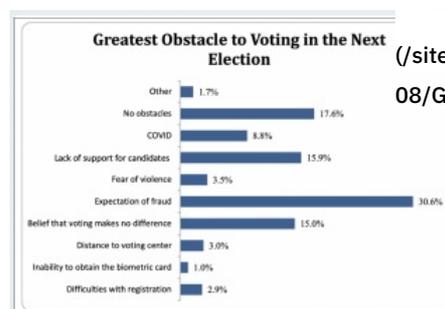
Likewise, most eligible voters don't expect the upcoming elections to be any more credible. Only 23.3% of respondents said that they believe the next elections will be “free and fair” or “somewhat free and fair.” This high level of voter distrust comes despite parliament's adoption of a new election law that empowers individual candidates—particularly independents—by establishing smaller electoral districts (83 in all) and by making votes non-transferable.

At issue may not be the law itself, which met one core demand of the protest movement, but rather a lack of voter confidence in the government's ability to create a secure environment where free and fair elections are possible. Factored into that assessment are the assassinations of key figures like Ehab al-Wazni and the ongoing impunity that allows such crimes to continue. Given the security environment, independent candidates who appear to gain momentum going into the elections may be particularly vulnerable; if they were to meet an untimely demise, or if they are intimidated into resigning, then the next top vote getter wins their seat. That creates a perverse incentive for bad actors—namely militias like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq—to use political violence.



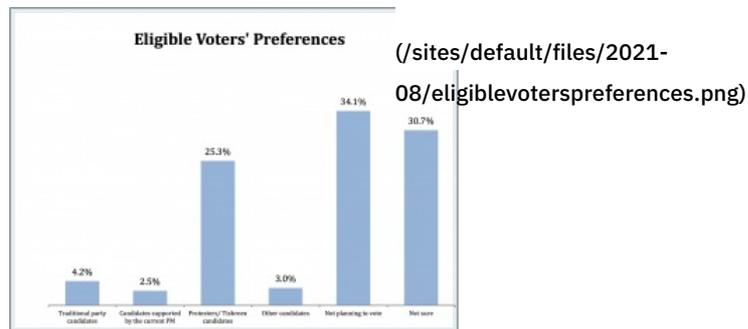
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Asked about the greatest barrier to voting in October, 6 out of 10 Iraqis expressed skepticism about the efficacy of voting, including 30.6% of respondents who cited fraud, 15.9% who said they don't support any of the candidates, and another 15% who said that their vote won't make a difference.

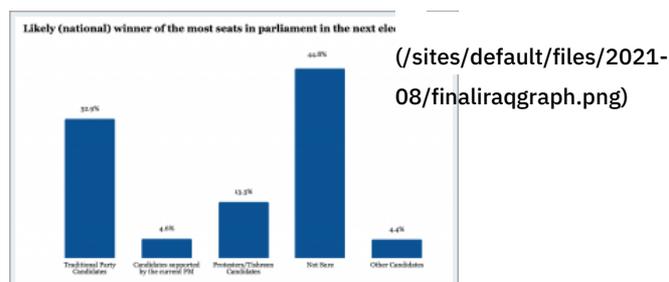


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Despite this demonstrated ambivalence toward voting, respondents who do plan to vote strongly favor reformist candidates who are not associated with the traditional parties. One out of four Iraqis polled said that they would vote for candidates representing the protesters and the broader *Tishreen* movement. This shows a demonstrable lead over establishment party candidates, who garnered the support of 4.2% of respondents, and candidates endorsed by incumbent Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who garnered 2.5%. Yet 30.7% of respondents reported that they were undecided and 34.1% reported that they planned not to vote; there is still much room for this picture to change.

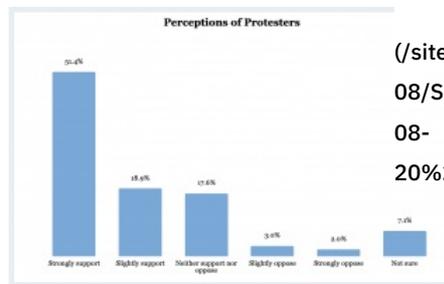


Asked about the expected outcome of the October elections, 32.9% of respondents said they expect candidates representing Iraq's establishment parties and their associated militias to come out on top, winning a majority of seats in parliament. When asked the same question about their own province, this rose to 38.3%. In contrast, 13.3% of respondents said that they believe candidates representing the *Tishreen* movement will win the largest number of seats at the national level.



However, were the voter turnout and preferences projected by this survey hold, *Tishreen* candidates could win more than 38% of the *actual* votes cast. That would represent a gain of up to 120 seats in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. However, this possible scenario is not without caveats. First, the three newly formed political parties representing *Tishreen* have collectively managed to field only 99 candidates in total. This includes 44 candidates registered with the Imtidad ('Reach') Movement, 35 with the Fao-Zakho Assembly (named after Iraq's northernmost and southernmost towns), and 20 with the Nazil Akhoth Haqqi ('Coming to Take My Right') Movement. According to Iraqi activists monitoring electoral campaigns, even adding *Tishreen* candidates who are running as independents or with the support of a moderate establishment party, their total remains well below 200. Therefore, out of the 3,243 candidates officially registered with Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), less than 200 are competing as *Tishreen*. Second, *Tishreen* candidates are not evenly spread across Iraq's 83 districts. As a result, many districts will have two or more *Tishreen* candidates competing for the same voters, thereby splitting the *Tishreen* vote and likely resulting in losses. Winning anywhere near half of the 120 seats would be an outstanding, highly improbable, feat.

Nevertheless, the survey shows strong public support for *Tishreen* and for the demands of the protest movement, and many voters appear ready to give movement candidates a vote of confidence. If voter turnout is strong and if the elections are genuinely free and fair—without the irregularities of past elections—*Tishreen* has an opportunity to gain a significant foothold in parliament. This could enable the *Tishreen* movement to push for reforms from within parliament while continuing to build strong public pressure on the streets.



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Voter turnout will be a critical variable in determining the shape of the next parliament and the trajectory of governance in Iraq. While those calling for a boycott are raising understandable moral arguments, particularly about the government’s failure to create a safe and fair electoral environment for pro-reform candidates and activists, they may also undermine a genuine opportunity to win political power at a moment when the movement enjoys strong public support.

In an election, everyone loses 100% of the votes not made; if the *Tishreen* movement’s supporters fail to turnout on election day, they could hand an easy win to the establishment parties. This would be a major setback for reform, and could set the stage for a renewed confrontation between Iraq’s disenfranchised populace and a callous, corrupt political class. In such a scenario, status quo forces could be expected to use overwhelming force to crush the movement and cement elite rule through *muhasasa*—the ethno-sectarian power-sharing system that has characterized politics in Iraq since 2003. Although it would not be the first time a reform movement in Iraq has faced violence and still managed to bring about change.

The full findings of EPIC’s survey and related research will be published in September as part of a report on Iraq’s Tishreen movement and its prospects for power. ❖

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