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# A Gateway to Change or New Conflicts: Iraq's 2021 Elections

by [Ali Al-Mikdam](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Ali Al-Mikdam](#)

Ali Al-Mikdam is an Iraqi writer and journalist and human rights activist, interested in Iraqi affairs, gender issues and human rights. He is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

**Iraqis are preparing to participate in the country's most important elections since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. As all parties prepare for the ballot, interviews with those who choose to participate and those boycotting it emphasize what's at stake.**

"We encourage everyone to participate, consciously and responsibly, in the upcoming elections. While not without some shortcomings, they are still the safest way for the country to cross into a future hopefully better than the past."

The supreme religious authority in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani issues this statement to encourage voters on Wednesday, September 29 to participate in the upcoming election—during which he also stressed that “voters should take the lessons from past experiences and be aware of the value of their votes and their important role in shaping the country's future.” He added that Iraqis should “take advantage of this important opportunity to bring about a real change in the administration of the state and remove corrupt and incompetent hands from its key positions.” As the highest religious authority for most of Iraq's Shia majority, this statement from a religious authority generally reticent to become involved in politics likely holds a good deal of weight for many Iraqi voters.

This statement likewise comes at a time when Iraqis are debating the merits of participating in the elections, scheduled for October 10, at all. Each side has a point of view: those who support participating say that there are two potentials for change, either via a popular uprising more powerful than the October 2019 protests (which

is unlikely) or via active participation in voting at the ballot boxes. In contrast, the boycotters' argument is that there is no logic to participating in the electoral process amid the country's real crisis of uncontrolled weapons, the dominance of ideological and pro-Iran armed groups, and the lack of electoral security where voters and independent candidate can feel at ease.

For Mashreq al-Furaiji, Secretary-General of the "I'm Going to Take My Democratic Rights" Party, he and his party will participate: "We have not found another solution or alternative step other than participating in the elections." His is one of the emerging political parties established after the October 2019 protests that seeks to take the momentum of those protests into the political field. Al-Furaiji also emphasized the primacy of the elections in his party's eyes: "there is no realistic project that we can be convinced of or take up other than the elections. We believe that it is the right step for peaceful and democratic change, and that there is no other option for change but to enter into this struggle and try our best to change the reality from within."

Al-Furaiji believes that the proportion of change relies on the numbers of voters, saying "there is a good opportunity for young people, independent candidates, and emerging political movements. This, as a beginning, will be a good start, especially as we need political opponents from inside power, and need to organize a real opposition within parliament."

Even so, he understands the reasoning of those who may be leaning towards staying home, explaining "boycotting the elections is the view of some who see it as a solution, or the beginning of organizing a project. It is respected, despite our differences over the mechanism but not the common goals. People should be aware that change is through their votes. Let us try, this is our chance."

In contrast, Alaa Sattar, a leading member of the National Home Party, believes that the elections results will be "disastrous and worse than the last elections," referring to the 2018 elections widely seen as corrupt, "which produced a fragile and weak government not representing the aspirations of the majority of Iraqis." For Sattar, "returning to protest again is already decided, if what we predict about the government that the October elections will produce comes true. We wish success for those who will participate amid this unsafe electoral atmosphere." Sattar characterized his decision to boycott a political stance rather than an arbitrary rejection, and emphasized that the boycott of the party is striving to distinguish itself from the 2018 boycott

This widespread boycott during the 2018 elections helped lead to the lowest rate of participation of any in post-2003 Iraq. According to Independent Electoral Commission statistics, nearly 80 percent of those entitled to vote refrained from doing so. The elections subsequently produced a parliament that was not satisfactory to the Iraqi public, and a government through political agreements headed by former Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, during whose term angry protests erupted across central and southern Iraq that were met with iron and fire, killing and injuring more than 20,000 people.

Yet others believe that there is still a chance for next week's elections to be different. That is what the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Jeanine Plasschaert, said at a United Nations session. However, she also emphasized that "successful elections are not, and cannot be, the sole responsibility of [the Electoral Commission]. We therefore consistently call on all stakeholders (including government officials, parties, candidates, political forces, civil society organizations, media outlets, and voters) to commit to transparent and credible elections—in words and deeds."

Plasschaert likewise urged that "the boycott is not an effective strategy, nor will it solve anything. On the contrary. A vote not cast, is in fact a gift to those you may be opposed to. Hence, it is important, for voters and politicians alike, to return to the process."

On an official level, a member of the Independent Electoral Commission who declined to be named reported that

steps were already in place to combat these issues: “the Commission has taken several measures aimed at eliminating methods of fraud and manipulation in all details of the electoral process, and blocked the way for those wishing to disturb it.”

He added that “the government now has an obligation to provide support to the voters, candidates, and the electoral process in general. One of the most important things that must be provided is to protect election centers and end the phenomenon of influencing the voter’s will through threats, intimidation, and pumping money,” as he put it.

The Independent Electoral Commission member likewise stressed that “if the government fulfills its obligations, there will be a comprehensive link from the voter to the candidate to the Commission, under the protection of the state and its military institutions to bring the elections to safety and create a suitable electoral environment, the results of which will be in the interest of the nation and the citizen.”

For his part, a separate political analyst and member of the Iraqi Home political Movement , Kitab Al-Mizan emphasized the importance of the electoral outcome: “the October elections are pivotal. They will paint the face of the current political system. The October vote was the result of the demands of the protests that Iraq witnessed in a very critical period. This election will have a positive outcome, provided that a safe environment is provided for it, weapons are restricted to the hands of the state, and sources of money for those outside the law are dried up.”

Al-Mizan added that “if that environment does not exist, the elections will produce a political class worse than before. For this reason, the international community and the Iraqi people are betting on them, because they are interim elections to pass through a crisis and establish a strong state.”

“The success of the elections and holding them without fraud will lead to the establishment and development of a political system through competent figures with integrity. Setting documents and international agreements in order will be their first task”, he said.

The political analyst believes that “this success, if it happens, will be thanks to the October protests. And if the opposite happens, it will lead to more corruption of the political class, continued foreign domination over Iraqi political decision-making, and the hijacking of the state at the hands of militias outside the law.”

In a related context, Muhammad al-Samidaei, an Iraqi citizen, said “the dominance of weapons and pro-Iran militias will not allow for their power and force to be taken by an independent candidate.”

He added that “I don’t think they will so easily give up all the power, money, real estate, degrees of employment, and control over state institutions that these uncontrolled forces have collected over the course of many years. The success of these elections is tied to the lost power of the state, and their failure would be a bad end for this country.”

Many view the October vote as another—and perhaps the last—chance to make the change that Iraqis aspire to through democratic methods. Even so, there are still many who say that there is no point in participating in elections whose results are known in advance.

As Iraqi voters decide whether to stay home or go to the polls on elections day, many questions remain unanswered. This country has many changes, more political fluctuations, and fast-moving events. It is only in time that Iraq's fate and what awaits Iraqis after the October vote can be known.



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