

# Reflections on Iraq's October Elections: The Good, the Bad, and the Still Unknown

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## While Iraq's new electoral law did have some successes, the reforms it attempted to achieve will only be able to come to fruition if the Iraqi electorate is convinced that elections can make a tangible difference in their lives.

Arrived in Iraqi Kurdistan from Italy on September 23. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government, was quiet. Apart from the posters of the candidates hanging on poles and walls, there were no other noticeable signs of the early October Iraqi parliamentary election in the city. Later on, the campaign did pick up and remained notably civil, not only in Kurdistan but also in the rest of Iraq. Yet on the streets, apathy, boycott, not turning up, and 'why should I vote,' were the buzzwords characterizing Iraqis' views of the elections.

Just off the plane, I had an exchange with an elderly taxi driver. When I asked whether he would be voting in the election, he replied, "No". When asked why, he explained: "I have voted in all previous elections, and nothing changed in my life." For him, real change meant better job opportunities and incomes. I discovered through further conversations that this mood is almost universal in the areas I visited. During Iraq's electoral cycle, life for the majority of its inhabitants was getting increasingly difficult.

This election cycle did differ from the previous election in many ways. First of all, the elections actually took place, with few reports of fraud. Iraq might be one of the very few, if not the only country in the Arab world that is currently managing a peaceful transfer of power. Yet this circumstance might not last long if the status quo prevails. After the demands from the 'Tishreeni'/October protesters, the Iraqi Parliament passed a [new electoral law \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bX2Vi8aMWgUgsCHuQ\\_RBJQIUPEhjmQh2i5ge1LkOHS03X\\_sCbHcg13k2b2VStUFIwL1WG7OkuxBI\\_0PgF4hA8LatL-B\\_oOxkYF1NOAiBD2-TAQL63K86wF64MB1xPD\)](#), yet its attempted reforms led to mixed results, and it will only be able to produce truly transformative governments if perspectives on the elections change.

### Frustration and Boycotts

Turnout was [historically low \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?baNcIHTIDMZxtW8gysh1p9VpEFqPdF\\_2Yk5567uYDhDbcEGi9p6MRPgsE7tPMUXgwiu2o10rNcuNTKZUmj0SjLoHuqipmS6XI75QoNx2sc-](#)

[44Rb47KFCs6\\_H6zr0PXyIDBjsz12BHkC8\\_hzifh17ATlqpx4ol8zDWH717-1vABqg-\)](#), though not much lower than the 2018 election. The lack of enthusiasm might have contributed to making the campaign less violent and more civil, but it is a clear sign of anger, dissatisfaction, frustration, and above all—a lack of trust in the current ruling elites and the system. It seems that by now, the disenchanted majority are fixed in their lack of buy-in to the system, while parties can garner only their loyal members—primarily consisting of those who receive party salaries. It is not surprising that the number of those who cast their votes and those who receive their salaries from the public sector are effectively equal: around 9 million. This makes Iraqi elections and democracy one of the most expensive and corrupt enterprises in the world.

For many Iraqis, factors like systematic corruption, the self-interest of politicians, the elites' monopoly over the government and Iraq's struggling economy, and the little room for political and economic newcomers all contributed to the high number of boycotts and absentees.

The situation is rather similar in Kurdistan, with a significant number boycotting the elections, resulting in increased seats for the KDP and New Generation, despite a noticeable decrease in their numerical votes from the previous election. The main casualty of the election was the Gorran (Change) movement, as the movement that began as an opposition party to the region's entrenched political parties failed to gain any seats. This was a clear message from their constituents after their shift from a party of opposition to a party of power.

Low turnout, especially in urban areas, puts the legitimacy of the government under the spotlight. This crisis of legitimacy was the main reason behind the early election and the new electoral law itself, as both were demands of the 'Tishreeni'/October protesters back in 2019. It is ironic that rather than refreshing the legitimacy of the government, the election may have had the opposite effect.

### Women's Participation Versus Women's Rights

Take, for example, the new election law's requirement that one quarter of MPs be women. The law expanded the number of constituencies from 18 to 83, which also is the number of quota seats for women, meaning that every voting district is required to send at least one woman to Parliament. With female parliamentarians exceeding this quota, the new law has certainly increased the number of women MPs quantitatively, but not necessarily qualitatively. It is expected that the majority of female MPs will come from the established traditional parties—these parties, rather than representing women and their causes, are more likely to harm them.

For instance, [domestic violence \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bUC9yhP6tZvXMYc5wnhG9KfCraWL2V2x\\_zizEYU8AbSoAq\\_oUeVxSgv9CeEdU2jmMLk7RccBuRcI4Cs4GKjWW1fWX4mZKnWaPqe8WCe1zITzZGxE9j0LtPwWjkA21WjEK\)](#)

is a major problem in Iraq—it is legally sanctioned except in the Kurdistan Region, which has a law against domestic violence. Article 41(1) of the Iraqi law gives a husband the legal right to "punish" his wife, parents, or children "within limits prescribed by law or custom." This law was not a point of contention during the election, and so far no female candidate has stood against it. In another case, a female candidate from an Islamic party in Iraqi Kurdistan ironically advocated for polygamy during the campaign.

### The Question of Independent Politicians

The new law also aimed at introducing a [delegate \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?b3xPlzC7YmIw4S1maHZU64MeQg6LACIb1eys8fFKgM1\\_bomBQQR8h\\_jSy1DoginCaITyofMRq6Y\\_lsjRh5OsPeLeIOsUafblAdmxTDIz-nVD-645Mz3SjYodCemoEor\)](#)'s style of

representation, attempting to encourage MPs to look out for the good of their electoral constituents and be more responsive to their needs. Under the new rules, candidates are able to

canvass in a smaller constituency, which consequently requires a smaller budget. Through this measure, the new law hoped to break up the major party elites' hegemony over the governing system.

Such an aim is hard to achieve in practice, especially in the first elections under this system. The big parties have established media apparatuses, a large amount of patronage, private armed groups, and the backing of regional powers. Moreover, for the current electoral law to achieve its goal, voters have to trust independent politicians. This is particularly difficult since independent MPs not backed by established parties are not a common feature in Iraqi political history. For instance, not a [single \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bs1bHWfoWpjb\\_fA9sS1L8JraSBL1Ah16FkF9K3cRvNo1mqX79ThbzFC8\\_ih2dr15t6k0r3LhTp17A8zMYiy5YUASbBbvNS76hWqcwb7nnFivs50PnSohJOhPPjKkY6mEuNobBH72yhsTR\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bs1bHWfoWpjb_fA9sS1L8JraSBL1Ah16FkF9K3cRvNo1mqX79ThbzFC8_ih2dr15t6k0r3LhTp17A8zMYiy5YUASbBbvNS76hWqcwb7nnFivs50PnSohJOhPPjKkY6mEuNobBH72yhsTR) independent candidate was elected in the districts that make up Iraqi Kurdistan. Though this trend seems to be changing among the Shia [youth \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?b4RJno3K-gRQv1K0\\_43wFj1\\_gcQDSlwLXIWBb8z1ZOyWJIS5sA6FfcwpOsw6eMeleCNLXuJuzXR8G\\_gSEP8P3meJjnjeOsdNSF4tqpC4HHSwtAftwUDGY91nUrdmWmp3q2Q5VoKmLoYMTFp83S\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?b4RJno3K-gRQv1K0_43wFj1_gcQDSlwLXIWBb8z1ZOyWJIS5sA6FfcwpOsw6eMeleCNLXuJuzXR8G_gSEP8P3meJjnjeOsdNSF4tqpC4HHSwtAftwUDGY91nUrdmWmp3q2Q5VoKmLoYMTFp83S), there will need to be a sustained movement by the electorate to diminish the established parties' grip on Parliament.

This change will require a shift in mindset among Iraqis themselves. Through various conversations, I realized that many Iraqis see even the independents as "not fully independent, [and] shadows of the established traditional party echelons." Many also argue that in a volatile political landscape like Iraq, a single MP who is truly independent will be crushed. These pre-established views are part of the legacy of the powerful, authoritarian rulers in the country.

A small number of independents won seats, but there is no guarantee that they will be able to organize a group and set the agenda—though there are efforts to build up a 'Tishreeni'/October protest bloc. Independents will be overly hesitant and careful at every step to avoid losing legitimacy in the street, and have vowed to be in the [opposition \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?b4RJno3K-gRQv1K0\\_43wFj1\\_gcQDSlwLXIWBb8z1ZOyWJIS5sA6FfcwpOsw6eMeleCNLXuJuzXR8G\\_gSEP8P3meJjnjeOsdNSF4tqpC4HHSwtAftwUDGY91nUrdmWmp3q2Q5VoKmLoYMTFp83S\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?b4RJno3K-gRQv1K0_43wFj1_gcQDSlwLXIWBb8z1ZOyWJIS5sA6FfcwpOsw6eMeleCNLXuJuzXR8G_gSEP8P3meJjnjeOsdNSF4tqpC4HHSwtAftwUDGY91nUrdmWmp3q2Q5VoKmLoYMTFp83S).

Complicating the cause of independents is that Iraq remains a country that votes along ethnic lines, with little cross-sectarian or inter-ethnic support for candidates. The current law has actually entrenched this scenario further through the larger number of districts, as there are very few multicultural locales remaining in Iraq.

In addition to these major divisions, every community—from small communities like the Yazidis to the country's Shia majority—is in and of itself severely fragmented. There are many reasons behind this fragmentation, from local to regional, as well as historical and security realities. The regional powers surrounding Iraq abuse these divisions and fragmentations—in a manner similar to imperial policies toward peripheries.

Adding to these complications is that, like many other laws in Iraq, this new electoral law has not been fully implemented. For instance, according to the new law, political parties with links to paramilitaries were not to take part in the elections. However, the parties with militias attached to them not only took part in elections, but were the main winners.

Likewise, in an attempt to avoid the fraud that has haunted previous elections, the voting system became technical to the point of tangibly reducing opportunities to vote. Thousands of the PCOS voting machines experienced operation failures from their opening at 7:00 am until 10:20 am, and were programmed to close down at 6:00 pm sharp. These issues decreased the voting time in many locations to less than 8 hours. The new law likewise demanded that potential voters register more than once, which contributed to decreasing the number of registrations.

In order to win a seat according to the new law, the candidates require organization and voter concentration. A number of political parties with higher votes gained fewer seats and vice versa. Sadr and the KDP both lost votes numerically but gained more seats: thanks to organization, concentration, and boycotts.

## A Clean Election

The new law did, however, achieve some successes. Notably, the election was not marred by major fraud. It was carried out under The First Past the Post and S.N.T.V. system. A combination of many factors made this election different from the previous one in 2018: a new electoral law, voting difficulties, and less fraud. It is certain that the new law impacted the result, but a number of electoral cycles are required for the citizens to take advantage of the changes and use them to their benefit.

One of the most striking features of this election was the loss of the political celebrities: former parliament speaker, former minister, and the major loss of former PM [Abadi \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bWhjVElkfuRRDadT2ptoOumJ2rISFRIY9XFVsvl77zcMoCv1pqOhmgh3EHf19qjPVtVWSYy6FKH89\\_2i-XS78x2\\_EBEwTJsEm2yDVONT6CW\\_tp1rGWZJGCPfyer5gftMk\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bWhjVElkfuRRDadT2ptoOumJ2rISFRIY9XFVsvl77zcMoCv1pqOhmgh3EHf19qjPVtVWSYy6FKH89_2i-XS78x2_EBEwTJsEm2yDVONT6CW_tp1rGWZJGCPfyer5gftMk)'s coalition. In the past, political leaders elected themselves and collected astronomical numbers of votes. This phenomenon is no longer the case, as leaders are not confident that they can collect a high number of votes in a smaller constituency. In addition, the anger of the majority toward the current elites made many hesitant to take a stand. However, an unfavorable outcome for the pro-Iranian militias might turn the situation more violent. The armed groups rely on other tools outside of political representation to maintain their positions and, above all, economic gains.

The election results crystalize further the fact that the majority of Iraqi people are frustrated with the militias and their parties. They expressed their wish by not voting. If the election results did not favor Iran and others, the resulting government may be more in line with U.S. interests. The leader of this election's largest party, Muqtada al-Sadr, has already changed his previous position and has since called for U.S. forces to [remain \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bgEwIDQxRidiAng3Sq3m4VjLkbYhV\\_7uUBhZbjF7Yk6UA6VkhagoMbls5MQzl2pJ5VyRWR90diiTAZTDPgWwl78QW79XZlkd3Ap09wtjt4hs\\_loM8tWi1b8M-EMiBmi6I-p833rldOEMRiDRpy\\_Fjh0-18A1-vkdC12NM\\_eKHZB8-\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bgEwIDQxRidiAng3Sq3m4VjLkbYhV_7uUBhZbjF7Yk6UA6VkhagoMbls5MQzl2pJ5VyRWR90diiTAZTDPgWwl78QW79XZlkd3Ap09wtjt4hs_loM8tWi1b8M-EMiBmi6I-p833rldOEMRiDRpy_Fjh0-18A1-vkdC12NM_eKHZB8-) in the country. Moreover, Sunni, Kurdish, and independent MPs will likely favor a strong relationship with the United States. ❖

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