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

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Frustration and Boycotts

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.

I arrived in Iraqi Kurdistan from Italy on September 23rd. 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/?b3XV8iaMwQ9c6UgChUq_RBQQU6hjcMN0hy2z15go1Lk0H80S0XcCv1bC1g13k2b2V8ULPfw1W7G0oxw5L0P7F4bAARt7B0-0Ox8yYF1NOA1B2D-TAQOL63186wF64MB1xPD), 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.

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/?bUCUvhbNw6SvXNcySwshbG9NkFvraW1L2Vza3ieYwUtAbbbqAo_o/evSvGwC6edU2jmMLk7RccBuRe1d4cGKkWW1IFX4mZK0VaqeWCe1ztTzZGkE90lL0LW6iJkA21WJ0K) 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/?b3XPRc7TYNiws4L1ma29Uf4MC0qaLACB1oysvDFkq901I_bmoBQQRhJRs1YDjgCaTynolMRagQ6Y_bjdB5S0Pe41oUAfHAdixTDX-nVTO6-45MnO3fIyOcEm8OnI)’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 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-

A brief analysis

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. The election results prove that many elites made many hesitant to take a stand. Phenomenon is no longer the case, as leaders are not confident that they can collect a high number of votes in a smaller constituency.

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 Sadr and the KDP both lost votes numerically but gained more seats: thanks to organization, concentration, and boycotts. 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.

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 Yazidi 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. Moreover, for the current electoral law to achieve its goal, voters have to trust the established parties’ grip on Parliament. This change will require a shift in mindset among Iraqis themselves. Through various interviews, 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.
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