

Electoral Reform: What's Really Needed in Iraq

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Lina Musawy is a political researcher specializing in Iraqi affairs. She has published a number of articles in major Iraqi newspapers pertinent to Iraqi politics and elections.



Brief Analysis

Among accusations of elections fraud and the burning of a warehouse storing half of Baghdad's ballot boxes, Iraq's electoral process appears to have experienced a dramatic challenge to its credibility. However, Iraqi voters' disaffection with the polling process is longstanding and was openly expressed through a major boycott of the electoral process in May. Citizens publicly declared their intention to boycott through a large social media campaign, using the hashtag "#boycotters." Country-wide voter turnout reportedly only reached 44.5%, with many suspecting that actual turn-out may have been even lower. Given recent elections' low participation rates, the Iraqi government may need to make a decisive change to the electoral system and the Independent High Electoral Commission in order to restore voter confidence and participation.

After 2003, Iraq adopted a representative democratic system, introducing political and party pluralism in order to gradually move towards a stable democracy. In principle, power is transferred peacefully by the ballot box and elections are considered the only valid mechanism of change in Iraq.

In order to facilitate this process, the Coalition Provisional Authority Order No. 96 of 2004 established electoral law implementing the proportional representation system, with the entirety of Iraq constituting a single electoral district. The law also approved the method of electing the Council of Representatives through general direct voting. In 2005, the Iraqi Elections Law repealed Order No. 96, amending the process to be more representative of the Iraqi electorate by separating Iraq into 18 districts wherein the voter elects a list, with the possibility of the voter giving preference to one candidate from the list.

However, the current electoral system suffers from many technical drawbacks. For example, the system promotes destabilizing levels of competition among the members of the same list, generating rivalries that have reached the point where political money is used to promote campaigns for the heads of blocs and electoral lists. More importantly, the system encourages small blocs to join the elections, resulting in wasted votes in favor of candidates with little support or even name recognition. For example, over a million votes in the 2018 election went to lists that did not reach the threshold for a candidate in Parliament. These lost votes are a direct blow to a democracy that aims to represent every part of society.

The Independent High Electoral Commission recently issued an opinion poll evaluating citizens' views of the current electoral system, with disheartening results. The poll showed that the vast majority of respondents were dissatisfied

with the existing electoral system. A total of 90% of respondents said that the electoral system does not ensure accountability, and 88.6% said that the current electoral system does not support the desired political stability. In addition, 75.7% of respondents said that the current electoral system does not create any kind of political opposition, and 87% believe that the current system does not contribute to the creation of a cross-sectarian bloc. Finally, 68.9% of respondents called for a change in the electoral system in Iraq, in addition to 65.7% of respondents who demanded the adoption of multiple districts within each governorate.

Reform of the electoral system can be accomplished by forfeiting the "Sainte-Laguë" method of calculating votes, which works in favor of the list as a whole rather than the individual candidates chosen by voters. Adopting a multi-district electoral system within a single governorate and allowing candidates to run regardless of whether they are affiliated with a party would each represent major steps towards greater democratic representation. These measures would increase the level of popular oversight and create competition between candidates in the electoral district itself. They would also reduce the significant number of votes wasted in many provinces on emerging parties that do not have enough supporters to win parliamentary seats. Finally, if implemented, these changes would enable candidates to derive their electoral power from their relationships with voters rather than parties.

Furthermore, Iraq's 18 districts are much too large to accurately represent the Iraqi electorate. There is a need to divide the districts based on the number of seats in Parliament so that there are 329 districts to elect 329 seats. This shift would ensure that the districts within the governorates suit the population in that geographical area.

Similarly, changes in who is allowed to vote would allow greater transparency. It is necessary to prohibit members of the security services inside Iraq from voting, so as to make them politically neutral and avoid the possibility of candidates demanding loyalty from them. There is also a need to conduct a modern census by the Ministry of Commerce, as there are a number of residents not currently accounted for with common interests who can help elect the best and most representative candidates for Parliament. Finally, these proposed systems can initially be applied at the level of Iraq's provincial councils to measure their applicability and success in order to ensure their efficacy at the federal level.

There are several potential obstacles that may arise during the proposed system's implementation. The adoption of individual elections will make the system vulnerable to the rise of MPs and businessmen who, with their state connections and influence, can make promises of reform and services through connections rather than the law. Furthermore, individual elections do not achieve optimal representation of minorities. This system may also face opposition from political parties that do not believe that the proposed electoral system is in the interest of their party or bloc. In its initial implementation, the system may also initially promote the rise of regional and tribal elders in Parliament who may not have a strong grasp on federal politics. Consequently, continuity is a necessary condition for the success of the proposed system, and one cannot guarantee its success in a single electoral cycle.

Nevertheless, the current cycle of elections has demonstrated that the existing system is deeply flawed and inspires distrust among Iraqi citizens. Iraq needs a change, and perhaps that change is best accomplished through a better electoral system. ❖

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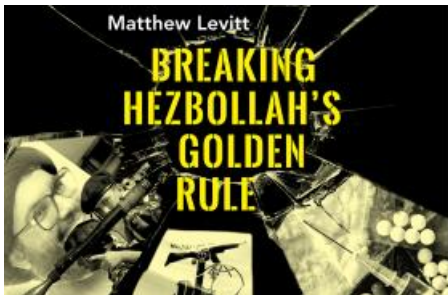
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