

## Surprises from Iraq's Provincial Elections

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### Brief Analysis

On February 5, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) released preliminary results from last Saturday's provincial elections. With 90 percent of the votes tallied, Iraq's new political landscape and key trends are slowly emerging -- with some surprising results. By far the loudest message from Iraqi voters was that the status quo had to go. In no provincial council did the current governing party win reelection. At the same time, candidates supported by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki did quite well, sending a mixed signal. Iraqi voters seemed to say they approved of the prime minister's centralizing tendencies even as they voted for government officials who will want more authority to govern locally.

### The Results

As the election results are translated into actual seats, it is clear that coalition building is now the name of the game. In all but two provinces, no party won anything close to an outright majority. Possibly more worrying is the reaction of those parties who were expected to perform well but did not, and those incumbents who now find themselves out on the street with no perks or patronage to spread around.

South and center. Al-Maliki's State of Law list finished first in all of the southern and central provinces except for Karbala, where, ironically, his home town is located. (Here, an independent candidate, Yousef al-Habubi, managed to come first with 13.3 percent of the votes.) Al-Maliki's list achieved its biggest margin of victory in Baghdad and Basra, winning 38 and 37 percent respectively. The Sadrist, largely discounted before the election, also did remarkably well. Their Free Independents Trend, one of the two parties Muqtada al-Sadr endorsed, came in second in both Maysan and Thiqrar provinces, with 15.2 and 14.1 percent respectively. The biggest loser in the south was al-Maliki's main rival, the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), which took a drubbing. It lost ground in every southern province and in Baghdad, where it came in fifth with a mere 5.4 percent of the vote. Even more astonishing are Basra's results, which show Fadhila, which controlled the majority in the provincial council until now, winning only 3.2 percent, a lower percentage than the 3.8 percent won by the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP).

North. The redrawing of northern Iraq's political map is even greater than the changes in the south. Because of the Sunni boycott in 2005, the Nineveh provincial council came to be dominated by the predominantly Kurdish Nineveh Brotherhood list. According to the results, however, this is going to change. The leading list is the Hadba list with 48.4 percent. The Nineveh Brotherhood is second with 25.5 percent of the votes. Other lists that could be asked to join a coalition in the province are the IIP, with 6.7 percent, and the Iraqi Turkeman Front, which won 2.8 percent. In Salah al-Din province, the IIP-supported Consensus of Salah al-Din Front list has won 14.5 percent of the votes, with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's list (the Iraqi National List) finishing second, securing 13.9 percent. Similarly, the IIP-supported list in Diyala (the Unified Consensus and Reform Front) secured 21.1 percent of the votes, followed by the Kurdish Alliance with 17.2 percent, the Iraqi National Project headed by Member of Parliament Saleh al-Mutlaq in third place with 15 percent, and Allawi's list finishing fourth with 9.5 percent.

West. In Anbar province, early projections of an IIP victory did not materialize. The leading list in the province is al-Mutlaq's Iraqi National

Project with 17.6 percent, followed by a Sahwa (Awakening) group headed by Ahmed Abu Risha with 17.1 percent, and the IIP in third place with 15.9 percent. Another tribal group headed by Hamid al-Hais garnered 4.5 percent of the votes.

#### What Does it all Mean?

Voters in southern and central Iraq, fed up with incompetence, punished ISCI for its failure to deliver on its promises from 2005. The party's perceived closeness to Iran may also have figured into its poor showing. In any case, ISCI's loss was al-Maliki's gain; the prime minister was apparently rewarded for restoring security in the south.

The political landscape in the Sunni-majority Nineveh province will change dramatically in favor of the Hadba list. On the one hand, this is encouraging for the overall representation of Sunnis, especially as it signifies their first real inclusion in the political process nearly six years after Saddam Hussein's fall. On the other hand, however, it is worrisome, since Nineveh remains one of the most unstable ethnographic areas of the country. Unless a modus vivendi is found within the provincial council between the majority Arab nationalists and the now minority Kurdish representatives, tensions in the province are likely to spike. There is similar concern regarding Diyala. In both provinces, coalition building is going to be crucial, with the nature of the coalitions that emerge defining the level of tension. A coalition of Hadbaa, IIP, and the Turkmen in Nineveh, for example, will further inflame ethnic tensions. In Salah al-Din, the results are more promising. The province had the highest turnout in the country (65 percent) and the fact that Ayad Allawi's secular Iraqiyah list came in a close second points to voters' desire for a different kind of politics.

Like ISCI in the south, IIP was punished for failing to deliver in the west and lost ground in both Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces. Here, too, coalitions will need to be formed, as no clear majorities emerged. Nonetheless, the history of tension between the IIP and the two leading lists makes it likely that the IIP will end up in opposition in the provinces it once controlled. What this will mean for the election of the Sunni speaker of parliament remains unclear.

#### How Did Underperforming Lists React?

One key to whether stability will be maintained after the certified results are announced will be the political maturity of those who did not perform up to their expectations.

In the south, ISCI has made clear that it accepts the results, issuing a statement on February 2 that expressed its support for the electoral process as well as its happiness that other members of the United Iraqi Alliance had done well (a clear reference to al-Maliki's Dawa party). In the same statement, ISCI expressed its desire to put the election behind and engage in a coalition-building process. A day later, on February 3, al-Maliki and ISCI leader Abdulaziz al-Hakim met to emphasize the importance of keeping previous promises to form coalitions with all lists that performed well. ISCI's conciliatory tone seems designed to avoid aggravating voters who have made a clear choice and who might later punish the party if it does not accept defeat graciously.

In the north, the Kurdish parties also acknowledged that they did not do as well as expected. At the same time, they maintain that the results in the disputed territories of Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Diyala provinces reinforce their claim that the voters there desire to be part of the Kurdish region, saying, in effect, that the election was a referendum on whether these towns and villages wish to become part of the Kurdish Regional Government.

The dark cloud that was hovering over Anbar due to the early projections will likely disappear now. After threatening to resort to violence if the IIP won the elections, Ahmed Abu Risha, the leader of the Awakening Councils, whose list came in second in Anbar, agreed after a meeting with the deputy prime minister, Rafi Issawi, and other Iraqi officials to "exhaust all legal methods [to resolve disputes]." This statement, coupled with the IHEC's prompt announcement of the results, should avert the crisis that was brewing in Anbar.

#### Conclusion

Voters in Iraq have sent a clear signal that they will not reelect politicians who fail to deliver. The vote for the prime minister's party also sent a strong message in favor of an empowered central government and dashed ISCI's hopes for an electoral endorsement of its pro-federalism policies. Key for al-Maliki and the winning parties will be demonstrating between now and December's parliamentary elections that they can deliver services where they won. Coalition governments, however, a necessity in nearly all the provinces, are unlikely to result in effective governance.

On the whole, Iraq's provincial elections have represented a solid step forward for its inchoate democracy, but difficulties lie ahead. The IHEC, supported by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and the Iraqi government, must be prepared to arbitrate disputes transparently and forcefully. Most urgently, it should resolve the charges of fraud in Anbar. Doing so will burnish the IHEC's credentials ahead of the parliamentary elections in December, proving to the Iraqi people that it can act truly independently.

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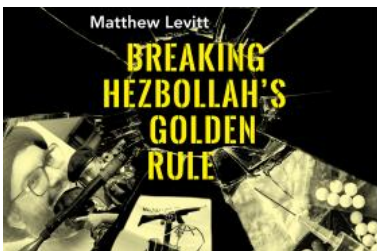
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