

Iraqi Election Success?

Not So Fast

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Articles & Testimony

Iraq's Jan. 31 provincial elections, the first since 2005, may seem to have gone rather smoothly and been accompanied only by limited violence, but it's still too early to breathe a sigh of relief. Every election has losers, and losers don't always accept defeat graciously. In mature Western democracies, losers usually assess what went wrong, go back to the drawing board, and work on their appeals to voters. In today's Iraq, they all too often resort to car bombs and bullets.

Within days, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) will release the percentage of votes each list of candidates received in the 14 of 18 provinces that held elections. These results will kick-start a frantic period of coalition-building. This process, undertaken in smoke-filled rooms, will decide the balance of power in each province

Until the official results are in, voter turnout provides some early insight into who the political losers might be. Across the 14 participating provinces, IHEC estimates the turnout was 51 percent. This figure is lower than the 55.7 percent turnout in the last provincial elections in January 2005 and is the first indicator concerning political changes during the last four years. As the turnout in predominately Sunni Arab provinces has grown -- from an average of 14.9 percent in January 2005 to turnouts ranging from 40 to 65 percent this January -- the reduced national turnout points to a decline in the participation of the Shiite Arab and Kurdish communities. Likely causes include voter registration problems (particularly among internally displaced persons), a confusing electoral system, and political dissatisfaction with existing political blocs.

Whatever the election results, there is guaranteed to be dissatisfaction among politically significant numbers of voters and unsuccessful candidates. With every provincial council but Baghdad's now comprising a third fewer seats than before, many incumbent politicians will lose their seats. Due to the greatly boosted number of candidates, there will be more unsuccessful candidates than ever before. Additionally, due to the complex balloting system, more voters than ever will see their votes "wasted" as their candidates fail to reach the high thresholds needed to win a single seat. Furthermore, almost 3 million voters in Kirkuk province and the three provinces of the Kurdistan Regional Government did not get a chance to vote due to the open-ended postponement of their elections. Lastly, both actual fraud (vote-buying and intimidation) and perceived fraud (voter registration failures and ballot shortages) will leave large number of voters disillusioned and will delay final results for weeks as appeals are resolved.

With such large-scale dissatisfaction, it's far too early to declare the elections a success. Granted, the limited violence witnessed during the election period is indicative of the general improvement in security. Only 14 attacks were recorded against polling sites during the elections, and no suicide-bombing attacks successfully targeted these centers, though at least three were foiled. Three candidates were assassinated in the 24 hours before the elections, and a further seven attempts were recorded against candidates in the week before (only one of which was successful). Where candidates were targeted for assassination, the cases appear to relate to personal, tribal, and

factional grievances. Furthermore, the mere fact that candidates competed on an open list on which their names were published underscores the improvement in general security across Iraq.

But that doesn't mean that violence did not and will not have a significant role in these elections. To recognize the hidden role that violence has played and may continue to play, one must look back many months before the election, and also peer forward many months into the future. From March to June 2008, the military campaign against followers of Moqtada al-Sadr had an important role in splintering the movement and making it hesitant to contest the elections in an open or coordinated manner. It's after elections, however, when violence becomes a more valuable tool. One need only look at the years following the 2005 elections to see that post-electoral assassinations against governors and police chiefs were routinely used as a means of altering the provincial balance of power. Based on that history, this time around individuals from disappointed or sidelined factions may also turn to violence. Particularly likely to do so are those who were not allowed to vote and continue to be ruled by another ethnosectarian group (notably Kirkuk's Arab community). Additionally, groups with a powerful grip on the security forces such as the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Kurdish parties are likely to react to setbacks by boosting their use of security forces to shore up their positions ahead of national elections.

So, until full election results are in and the reactions of losers have been considered, it remains too soon to hail these provincial elections as a success. We've got to continue holding our breath.

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