

Iraq's Elections:

What's at Stake?

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Articles & Testimony

The upcoming provincial elections in Iraq, scheduled for January 2009, will provide the best indicators to date of the health of Iraq's political system, the relative popularity of political parties, and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's prospects for re-election in national elections planned for December 2009. Iraqis have been concerned by the delay of the elections (originally planned for 2008), but holding the polls will show Iraqi voters that the government and provincial councils are committed to regular elections.

Iraq will hold provincial elections in 14 of its 18 provinces on January 31, 2009. Elections in Tamim (Kirkuk) Province will be delayed until the disputed status of Kirkuk is resolved, and polls will be held in the three governorates of the Kurdistan Regional Government at a time of the Kurdistan National Assembly's choosing. Even so, some 75 percent of Iraq's voting population will have a chance to participate in the provincial polls, last held in January 2005.

Iraq's provincial elections are likely to be especially significant for a number of reasons. The provinces are increasingly important in the partially decentralized Iraqi system. Provincial elections select provincial council members, who in turn elect a governor. Councils and governors have significant authority under the June 2008 provincial powers law. They strongly influence the appointment and dismissal of provincial police chiefs, the senior security officials in the governorate. With the assistance of Coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), some provinces have become highly active in economic development, using a blend of money from the federal government and private investors.

The provincial elections will also provide the most detailed insight so far into the relative strength of Iraq's political parties. For instance, in the two national parliamentary elections held in 2005, the main Shiite political parties banded together under the United Iraqi Alliance list, thereby concealing their relative popularity. In contrast, the Shiite parties will contest the provincial elections through separate lists, so the election will demonstrate their relative political appeal. In addition, the Sunni Arabs and many of Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters, who boycotted the last provincial elections in January 2005, are likely to vote this time.

Although the expected broad participation will make the provincial elections a good gauge of Iraqi political preferences, the elections will not be perfect. In particular, certain features of the electoral law will significantly influence the outcome. The September 2008 provincial electoral law gives advantages to well-organized and well-funded political parties, as well as individuals with good name recognition. Independents campaigning on the strength of their ideas stand little chance of winning seats (note that the same could be said of the United States and most other major democracies).

The lack of a campaign financing law means that wealthy individuals, political parties, and foreign powers can influence the election. It may be difficult for Iraqis to know exactly for whom they are voting; political pressure has forced some parties -- such as Sadr's followers -- to split their candidates up among lists, and some major Islamist

parties will conceal their identity within lists in areas where they are unpopular. Violent intimidation is likely to undermine fair elections in many provinces due to the lack of international election observers or security assistance from the Multi-National Force.

Within the nine Shiite provinces of southern and central Iraq, the key issue at stake is the relative balance of power between the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SCIRI) and Maliki's Daawa party. Each of these groups has been energetically building its support base across the south. SCIRI has certain advantages, including current control of most of the governorships in the south and a well-funded political recruitment drive that has been operating for over two years. Daawa's advantages include Maliki's popularity as a strong man and his use of government-funded Tribal Support Councils to dispense money and political favors to rural Iraqi community leaders since April 2008. With the Sadrist vote likely to be split among several smaller political parties (such as Fadhila and other Islamist and tribal lists), most southern provincial councils will probably be evenly balanced between SCIRI and Daawa, with smaller parties tipping the balance in favor of one or the other.

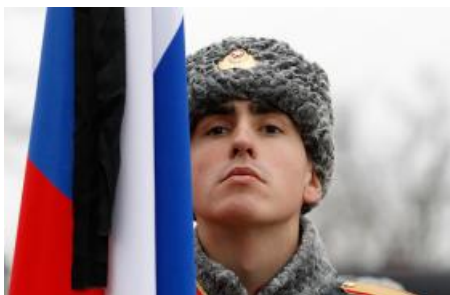
In Baghdad and the northern provinces, the elections will produce a wide range of outcomes. In Anbar and Salah al-Din, the main Ramadi-based Sunni Arab factions will form majority blocs, combining the political party apparatus of the Iraqi Islamic Party and the grassroots support of Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi's Iraqi Awakening Council. In Nineveh, the Sunni Arabs will probably be disappointed by disruption of the polls and by perceived or actual electoral fraud favoring the Kurdish factions. In Diyala and Baghdad, a combination of Sunni Arab parties and Sahwa (Awakening) movements will increase their share of the provincial councils but Sunnis will again probably be disappointed by perceived or actual electoral fraud favoring Shiite Arabs.

The highly fractionalized provincial councils that will emerge across the country will demonstrate that the Iraqi political system is slowly opening to new players. Such divided councils may allow strong provincial governors to emerge from under the wing of individual political parties and begin to utilize the decentralizing executive powers that are granted in the provincial powers law. A downside of the elections is that voters will replace some of the executive decision-makers with the most experience in governance and the best relationships with PRTs, reducing the capacity of the provincial governments to plan economic development and spend their budgets. Although the elections will be imperfect, it is important that they be held in order to show that the central Iraqi government is committed to democratic rule and that the provincial councils are accountable, at least to some extent, to the people.

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