



IRAQI PROVINCIAL ELECTION REPORT

by Reid Smith

In January 2005, Iraqis proudly displayed ink-stained fingers, confirming their participation in the formation of a national reconciliation government. That mark represented their first opportunity to take part in a democratic election in more than thirty years and seemed to represent a bold symbol of freedom. Sadly, the ensuing flood of ethnic and sectarian violence dashed initial hopes for liberal democracy in Iraq.

Four years later, the political landscape in Iraq appeared more suitable for participatory elections. Security had improved considerably, and the concept of democracy had had time to mature. An Iraqi journalist hurling his shoes at the President of the United States had replaced the ink-stained finger as the image of freedom in Iraq. But new questions have begun to emerge about the shape and stature of political participation.

While it was too much to hope that the January 31 election would produce results that were fully transparent, free and fair, a relatively peaceful day at the polls represented by a broad spectrum of political and ethnic identities marked a significant step toward self-rule in an Iraq weaning itself from American control. However, with 90 percent of the votes counted under the supervision of international observers, the most dangerous part of the election process may be yet to come, as parties that had expected victory learn of their defeat.

WHY THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS MATTER

On January 31, Iraqi men and women went to the polls in 14 of 18 provinces, carrying with them the responsibility for the first real local elections held totally in the hands of the Iraqi people in decades. The local representatives they selected will be charged with selecting a provincial governor and will have significant authority under the June 2008 provincial powers law to exert influence on the appointment and dismissal of police officials and security officers.¹

On the ballot, some 14,500 candidates from 502 parties vied for the 440 open seats on the provincial councils.² For the first time, the names and faces of candidates appeared on ballots and in election ads in place of the numbered political affiliations that once represented each candidate. Placards and posters blanketed local walls, and print advertisements clogged the pages of newspapers. The government only recently decided to allow such unprecedented transparency in light of security gains. And despite the persistent threat of violence, voters turned out in an effort to secure Iraq's stability, expressing their displeasure with the existing provincial councils, whom they blame for the poor quality and limited availability of essentials such as food, clean water, and electricity.

Thus far, this vote has told us about two significant developments.³ First, it was a referendum on Prime Minister al-Maliki, as his growing popularity across traditional divisions of ethnic and religious identity has begun to threaten his political allies. This is the story of a leader outgrowing his original political base. The United Iraqi Alliance that helped him into office collapsed following the withdrawal of the Sadr bloc in late 2006 and early 2007; more recently, the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) ended its marriage of convenience to al-Maliki's Dawah Party. The Prime Minister had therefore begun a campaign of outreach in order to consolidate his federal power, despite the fact that he was not up for reelection. His emphasis on security and his advocacy of national unity found traction with a broad spectrum of Iraqi voters. The rival ISCI's hopes to capitalize on its incumbency in much of the oil-rich southern provinces failed to generate support, dashing its plans to designate an independent Shia region in the south. The cleric-dominated party, founded in Iran by Iraqi Shias who had fled Baathist tyranny, was defeated at the polls because of its recent history of poor governance, its emphasis on religious identity, and the popular perception that it is an Iranian proxy.

¹ Michael Knights, "Iraq's Elections: What's at Stake," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 15, 2008.

² Mohammed al Dulaimy, "Thousands of Candidates May Complicate Iraq's Provincial Elections," *McClatchy Newspapers*, December 28, 2008.

³ See for election results Stephen Farrell, "Election: Preliminary Results," *New York Times*, February 5, 2009.

The second issue is the state of Sunni Iraq. The Iraqi Sunni Arab population, many of whom did not vote in 2005, chose among a dizzying array of the Awakening movement groups that have struggled to unite under a common banner. They competed with the devout Iraqi Islamic Party to set the minority agenda. These provincial elections were particularly significant because they presented the disenfranchised Sunni population with an opportunity to make their voices heard. Given the recent removal of disgraced Mahmoud al-Mashhadani from his position as Parliamentary speaker and the subsequent collapse of Tawafiq, the main Sunni coalition in parliament, such reassurance could not arrive too quickly. Although Sunni candidates reinvigorated their relevance in Mosul's Ninewa province, disappointing returns for Sunni candidates in Baghdad and a voting fraud debacle in Anbar province may presage chronic Sunni alienation and intra-sectarian violence.

With any luck, the fact that nearly all major actors accepted the significance of the elections and decided to participate may indicate a step in the right direction. Despite the inevitable blemishes and lower voter turnout than many had predicted, even an imperfect election result can go a long way towards repairing many of the issues associated with the 2005 election, such as the imbalance of power produced by the boycott of Sunni Arabs and followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. The questions remains whether the defining elements of the 2005 election will begin to fall by the wayside as voters emphasize nationalism, security, and service delivery over ethnic and religious identity.

IMPORTANT REGIONAL ISSUES

As previously mentioned, four of the eighteen governorates did not open polls on January 31, 2009, given special procedure. The three Kurdish provinces of Erbil, Suleimaniya and Dohuk, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government, abide by the semi-autonomous region's constitution and will hold elections later in 2009. Likewise elections were not held in Tamin province, home to the hotly contested city of Kirkuk, until the Council of Representatives in Baghdad passes a special election law.⁴ The city's deteriorating stability will depend upon the Iraqi government's ability to suppress or manage historic ethnic unrest that has been galvanized by issues surrounding the development of the national oil sector and oil revenues. Ultimately, Kirkuk's exclusion from the provincial election calendar is representative of the unresolved status of the hydrocarbon law.

In the south, the governorate of Basra surfaced as a battleground province for the major Shia parties. This state commands strategic importance, containing 70 percent of Iraq's proven oil reserves of 115 billion barrels, and the nation's only access to the sea--the Umm Qasr port located on the Persian Gulf.⁵ The province has been relatively quiet since al-Maliki ordered last year's military crackdown; however, tensions between ISCI, Dawa, the Sadrists, and the Islamic Virtue Party, a smaller religious party that controlled the province after the local races in 2005, flared in a hotly contested race that tested the reputation of Shia-identity politics and the influence of neighboring Iran. Although religion was emphasized during the 2005 election, the resulting violence exhausted the patience of many voters who arrived to polling booths more focused on the provision of basic services and security than religious sectarianism. Accordingly, Shia constituents in the south favored al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, with its emphasis on national secularism, and *Fadhila's* proclaimed independence from Iranian influence. Even the Sadrists eschewed religious politics for the sake of Iraqi patriotism, although the prevailing impression that Sadr's nationalism has been undermined by his increasing dependence on Iran hurt the candidates he sponsored. However, ISCI clearly suffered the greatest setback in the region. Having lost seats in all nine southern provinces, they will need to restore their nationalist credentials, and deemphasize their Tehrani patronage, if they want to remain relevant in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Conflict simmered in the northern Ninewa governorate and its volatile capital, Mosul. The five political blocs competing in provincial elections in and around Mosul demanded additional government protection because of tensions between the Kurds and Sunni Arabs. Provincial politics had been unhinged since the 2005 election, when the minority Kurds seized 31 of 41 seats because of the Sunni election boycott. In an effort to realign the political balance, the Iraqi government recently sent Arab forces to the province to replace the Kurdish troops, who had been responsible for security in this province where al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other Sunni militants remain active. Although insurgent violence has diminished in other parts of Iraq, frequent attacks still plague Mosul. As predicted, a new Sunni bloc, known as *al-Hadba*, emerged victorious over its Kurdish opposition and has promised to restore political balance.

In Anbar and Diyala Provinces, the Sunni tribes have belatedly awakened to democracy. The discordant bunch of sheikh-led councils had high hopes in a region where ancient tribal relationships are shaping the character of local politics. Full of venom for the devout Iraqi Islamic Party, whom they believe took advantage of the planned 2005 Sunni boycott to seize council seats, these groups arranged a conflicting platform and were edged out by their political rivals for a slim plurality, according to preliminary results. Iraqi election monitors have found the hundreds of allegations of voter fraud significant enough to warrant investigation. Ahmed Abu Risha, the leading voice of the Awakening movement, has warned that if the IIP ends up victorious in the polls, he will turn Anbar into "Darfur," stating that an "honest dictatorship is better than a democracy won

⁴ Ahmed Ali and Michael Knights, "Kirkuk: A Test for the International Community," Policy Watch #1456, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 14, 2009.

⁵ Hamza Henawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Basra is the focus of Shiite Rivalry in the southern Iraq," *Associated Press*, January 14, 2009.

through fraud.”⁶ Iraqi Security Forces and U.S. Marines are currently bracing for a possible outbreak of violence.

THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS AND US INTERESTS

The elections have an important bearing on the future of U.S.-Iraqi relations, for they come after a difficult negotiation over future status of U.S. forces. After months of deliberation and disagreement between Iraqi leadership and U.S. officials, Prime Minister al-Maliki’s Cabinet finally approved the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) on November 16, 2008.⁷ The following day, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari and U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker both signed the pact at an official ceremony. Following this public endorsement, the process turned to the Iraqi Parliament where a slim majority, 149 of the 275 members, voted in favor of the agreement. Most of those in favor were members of al-Maliki’s Dawah party, the ISCI, and the two major Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.⁸ Eighty-six members of Parliament did not attend the vote, apparently for fear of their lives, in the immediate sense, or their political careers given the upcoming provincial elections. Most of the votes against the agreement were cast by members of the Sadrist bloc, who stopped just short of rioting when the document was read in session.

Although the Presidential Council put the official stamp of legislative approval on the document the day after its ratification by Parliament, questions remain about the SOFA’s fate given the impending July referendum, and the obvious reticence of so many members of Parliament to support it. One can safely assume that they are well aware of the deeply rooted opposition of Iraq’s civilian population to continued presence of U.S. forces, and their deep dissatisfaction with the job the government has done up until now. Moreover, beyond domestic policy considerations, several significant international matters are at play.

The United States needs the SOFA to maintain a legal military presence in Iraq, given the expiration of the UN mandate for international forces on December 31, 2008. President Bush went into the SOFA negotiations intent upon securing a long-term U.S. military presence, and was surprised to learn that Iraqi leadership, led by Prime Minister al-Maliki, had decided to take a hard line against U.S. wishes. As the New Year’s Eve deadline approached, it became clear that Iraqi leaders involved in the negotiations had kept a very close eye on the U.S. presidential election, given Barack Obama’s campaign promise of a sixteen-month timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq.

Then there is Iran. The election of President Obama allowed Iran’s political agents operating in Iraq to take a more middle-of-the-road stance on matter of the SOFA. Specific language within the agreement stating that “Iraqi land, sea, and air shall not be used as a launching or transit point for attacks against other countries,” may have also tempered Iranian resistance.⁹ However, Iran appeared to have suffered a major setback as they are widely seen as sponsors of the ISCI, whose drastic loss of votes stemmed from popular revulsion with Tehran’s influence in Iraq. This should further benefit the permanence of the SOFA arrangement.

Thus, the SOFA is secure for the moment. Al-Maliki has emerged as a capable political strongman, who is increasing popular across ethnic and sectarian lines having successfully credited himself with increasing national security, and talking the mighty U.S. down to size in SOFA negotiations. In an election that was defined by local issues such as garbage collection, housing shortages, unclean water, and the lack of electricity, debate surrounding the SOFA was largely disregarded. However, given al-Maliki’s political ascendance, one must assume that the people have put their faith in his ability to keep them safe, and will tolerate his signature security agreement and the continued presence of U.S. troops through the July referendum.

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⁶ Sudarsan Raghavan, “As Anbar Counts Votes, Sheikhs Voice Defiance,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2009.

⁷ The U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement signed at the end of 2008 is a binding agreement between the two countries that regulates “the temporary presence, activities and withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq.” The agreement establishes a withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, exit from Iraq by December 31, 2011, subject to further negotiations and a referendum scheduled for mid-2009 in Iraq which could demand that U.S. forces leave by the middle of 2010.

⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, “Iraq: The Thirteenth Hour,” *Agence Global*, December 1, 2008.

⁹ “Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities During Their Temporary Presence in Iraq,” The White House, Nov. 27, 2008.