
The Forthcoming Elections; Voter Hesitation and Unforeseen Electoral Outcomes

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Undoubtedly, The ongoing discussions among the political parties in the Kurdistan Region in the context of the efforts towards reconciliation, particularly concerning the Kurdistan parliamentary elections, is a multifaceted matter. Since the 1990s, when the reformation of the global order followed the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the Kurdish civil war emerged as a subject of interest for certain regional actors, particularly since the inception of the initial electoral experiment.

Presently, when considering the intricacies of power dynamics within Iraq and the broader Middle East, especially as Iraq recovers and approaches provincial council elections that could potentially ignite further internal Shiite discord, conducting elections and achieving internal Kurdish compromises is not straightforward and doesn't align with the interests of various internal and external actors. This might explain why the decision was made to postpone the elections until the following year. Nonetheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that despite this context, there are still parties that are hesitant about moving forward with elections. At Rudaw Research Center, during the period of late June to July this year, we delved into a neglected aspect: the perspective of the people themselves!

We carried out an extensive survey across the Kurdistan Region, conducting direct and random interviews with 2,412 individuals at 402 diverse locations. The insights gathered from these survey participants provide us with valuable insights into the underlying reasons behind the controversial nature of the upcoming elections.

Unpredictable outcomes?

The forthcoming elections are poised to deliver unexpected outcomes owing to variety of factors, as the poll suggests. In the 2018 Kurdistan Parliamentary elections, the voter count in the Kurdistan Region stood at 3,085,461. The Iraqi High Election Commission (IHEC) projected the voter count for 2021 to be 3,227,551, and the current estimate for the next parliamentary elections, is at 3,641,000 voters, as set by President Nechirvan Barzani to be held on February 25, 2024 . With these numbers forming the basis, it's anticipated that the Kurdistan Region will witness the emergence of more than 400,000 new voters, a figure that could potentially rise to 500,000-600,000 by 2024, further amplifying the unpredictability of the electoral dynamics. Among first-time eligible voters aged 18-22, a notable 61% expressed their intention to cast their votes. However, as the age groups progress, the inclination to participate diminishes, reaching a mere 17% within the 60+ age group. A prior survey conducted by the Rudaw Research Center in June this year highlighted that young individuals aged 15-29 exhibited a robust desire to participate, standing at 72%. Certainly, this enthusiasm is naturally contingent upon their eligibility to vote, as some individuals within this age range might not have reached the required voting age yet.

The electoral choices of those participating for the first time predominantly gravitate toward the KDP, The New Generation Party, and subsequently, the PUK. This trend isn't surprising, considering that a significant number of young individuals are concentrated in Duhok and Erbil provinces. Intriguingly, the aspiration to participate appears more muted within the urban centers of large cities, while it gains more traction in the surrounding areas and villages. Geographically, the highest enthusiasm for electoral participation was observed in Soran, Zakho, Erbil, and Duhok, while the lowest levels were registered in Raperin, Halabja, Garmian, and Sulaimani.

Indeed, in the upcoming elections, the foremost victors might paradoxically be those who abstain from voting. Within the electorate of 3,641,000 voters in the Kurdistan Region, this group comprises over 1.4 million individuals, constituting a significant proportion which account for 39.7%. Alongside these non-participants, the groups like undecided voters and those who submit blank ballots as it is important to highlight that they might shift their stance until the day of the elections, together they could bring unpredictable outcomes in the elections which collectively, they account for 32.9% of the overall vote. The survey results reveal that 29.2% of respondents are undecided voters, encompassing 641,092

individuals, while 3.7% opt for blank ballots, totaling 81,234 voters. The highest concentration of these voters was observed in Sulaimani (55.1%), Halabja (53.1%), Raperin (49.1%), and Erbil (26.4%).

This implies that while the preferences of Duhok, Zakho, and Soran voters are relatively clear from the outset, the electoral decisions in Sulaimani, Garmian, Raperin, and Halabja could be swayed by the undecided voters.

A significant portion of the undecided voters consists of individuals who had previously supported PUK and KDP but have since changed their stance. Consequently, they are not expected to lean toward them. The pivotal question, however, revolves around where these votes will ultimately gravitate? They may potentially disperse among other parties or to support a new party or entity, evoking a scenario reminiscent of 2009. Notably, in contrast to 2009, voters' priorities have evolved, yielding a heightened sense of hesitation. Core issues such as enhancing basic services (56.7%), facilitating employment for university graduates (41.8%), addressing salary arrears (39.8%), and curbing corruption (34.2%) have emerged as the pivotal concerns demanding the attention of the winning party.

In contrast, the preference for freedom of speech was indicated by 2.6% of respondents, while political stability was supported by 5.2%. This observation indicates that the voters place a higher emphasis on economic and service-related concerns rather than those pertaining to democracy and freedoms. This phenomenon might potentially explain the anticipated growth in electoral support for the PUK and KDP parties in the next elections, while concurrently signaling a decline in popularity for other political parties. Moreover, there exists a substantial likelihood of a new political party emerging in the near future. Furthermore, it should be noted that regions where other political parties have previously had significant support exhibit the greatest percentages of abstention and non-disclosure of ballots. According to the survey data, the percentages of individuals who expressed their intention not to participate in the elections were found to be 59.3% in Sulaimani, 59% in Garmian, 56.7% in Halabja, and 42.1% in Raperin. The recorded percentages were 35.7% in Erbil, 33% in Soran, 25.7% in Duhok, and 6.8% in Zakho.

Conclusion

As per the findings of the Rudaw Research Center survey, a noteworthy 57.7% of voters are expected to make their party choice more than a month prior to the election day. This trend could potentially impact the dynamics of political polarization and voting behavior in the region. However, there is a substantial cohort that remains hesitant to engage in the process. According to the survey, those who won't participate in the forthcoming election, the undecided voters and those who cast empty ballots are the most significant subset, comprising 39.7% of citizens, will abstain from voting, while 29.2% of participants are inclined to keep their choice undisclosed. Additionally, 3.7% stated that they would cast blank ballot. Collectively, these segments account for an estimated 2,167,252 individuals. This introduces the potential for unforeseen outcomes in the forthcoming election.