
Initial Insights into the Iraqi Provincial Elections

20-12-2023

Authors

Ziryan Rojhelati

Summary : Approximately 6.6 million voters participated in the Iraqi provincial council elections, 41% of those eligible to vote. However, with a total of more than 26 million voters, this election and its results represent approximately 25% of all eligible voters. The significance lies not solely in reflecting voter will but in its potential to drive crucial political developments

Approximately 6.6 million voters participated in the Iraqi provincial council elections, 41% of those eligible to vote. However, with a total of more than 26 million voters, this election and its results represent approximately 25% of all eligible voters. The significance lies not solely in reflecting voter will but in its potential to drive crucial political developments.

How We Interpret the Results?

Firstly, the star of fortune for Mohammed Halbousi continues to shine as the new Sunni leader of Iraq, closely observed after his expulsion from the position of the speaker of parliament. In the provincial election, his list secured the first place in Anbar, with the second and third lists closely affiliated. In Baghdad, Sadr's boycott provided him with the opportunity to be the first winner, ranking second in Diyala and fourth in Nineveh and Salahaddin. The highlight of the election is that Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law list claimed the first place in Muthanna province alone, despite an increase of nearly 29,000 votes. In the 2021 elections, he lagged behind the Sadrists in at least four provinces.

The 2023 elections represented, in a sense, internal competition among parties within the Coordination Framework that the Nabni Coalition, potentially an extension of the Fatah Coalition with some changes, secured the top position in five provinces. The list of governors (Tasmim, Ibda' Karbala, Wasit Ajmal) claimed the first place in all three provinces of Basra, Wasit, and Karbala, establishing a significant presence in the internal Shiite competition. Additionally, in comparison to the 2021 elections, the Kurdish vote increased; however, the prevalence of multi-lists appears to be the primary factor contributing to the division of votes.

In 2021, the total votes for the Kurdistan Coalition, KDP, and the New Generation were 138,411, while in this election, the combined votes for these three parties reached 210,741 (excluding other parties' votes). Despite this increase, the Kurds secured only seven seats, falling short of the potential to win half or half +1 based on the votes. Consequently, they now seek collaboration with other parties for the governor's post.

In Diyala, the Kurdish parties garnered 21,722 votes in 2021, increasing to 30,916 votes this year. In Nineveh, the combined votes of Kurdistan Coalition and KDP were 167,521 in 2021, rising to 173,877 this year. Unlike the Shiites, who adopted a joint list strategy in multi-ethnic provinces, the Kurdish parties ran on separate lists, leading to divisions despite the overall increase in Kurdish votes. Notably, in Salahaddin, Kurdish parties collaborated with other coalitions, presenting a distinct situation.

The PUK secured the first position in Kirkuk, serving as a test for the party leader, who seems to have successfully solidified his position. In the 2021 election, the PUK had 63,371 votes, and this time it increased to about 140,000. Also in Kirkuk, the Turkmen were divided, the Sunni Turkmen aligned with the Turkmen Front, while the Shiite Turkmen followed a different path. However, the Turkmen Front struggled to establish a firm position and only secured two seats. Meanwhile, Sunni Arabs emerged stronger than before.

Impact of the Results

The election results will bolster the Coordination Framework's position in Iraqi politics. With a majority in parliament and the presidency of executive branch, they will enhance their standing through the powers of governors and local councils. Their influence extends beyond the southern and central regions; using their lists or political tools, they will contribute to shaping local administrations in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and even Anbar and Salahuddin. In Nineveh, the Nineveh for its people, led by former governor Najim al-Jubouri, secured the top position and requires support from Shiite lists to pass the Ba'ath eradication law that prompted his resignation. Halbousi's list needs the approval of Shiite parties in parliament if it wants

to regain the post, which may entail them demanding a greater role in Anbar in return. Similarly, the Kurds rely on their support to secure the position of governor in Kirkuk, a common demand among Kurdish parties.

One noteworthy point is that Sadr may be more comfortable with the current results, given that Nuri al-Maliki failed to secure victories in many provinces, and Basra did not fall to the Nabni Coalition. The success of the Nabni Coalition in five provinces, led by Hadi al-Amiri, coupled with the victories of three previous governors (Karbala, Wasit, and Basra), presents a better option for Sadr than Maliki's list. This is because Sadr can deal more easily with those governors and Hadi Amiri.

Another notable aspect is that Halbousi's Sunni rivals, mostly seasoned politicians and ministers from previous cabinets like Rafi al-Issawi, Khaled al-Obaidi, and others, failed to overcome him. This solidifies Halbousi as the most influential figure in the new generation of Sunni leadership. Despite the increased votes, Kurdish parties secured fewer seats in Diyala, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, and Nineveh, looking ahead, their role is expected to grow in the local administration and provincial councils of Kirkuk and Nineveh during the next phase. This is particularly positive given the challenges they have faced since 2017.

Legal Success and the Issue of Representation

There is little debate about the conduct of the electoral process, and there seems to be no legal issue. However, the key concern lies in how well the results truly reflect the will of the people. In Baghdad and nine southern and central Iraqi provinces, except for Basra and Maysan, where voter turnout increased, turnout was 7 percent lower than in the previous election. This decrease might be attributed to the influence of Sadr, who had called for a boycott. The low turnout positions Sadr as a sort of absentee winner of the election, paving the way for potential influence in the next round if he turns to the streets and political protests.

| Election Turnout and Number of Coalitions in 2023 | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| Province | 2021 | 2023 | Number of Coalition |
| Salahaddin | 48 | 59 | 6 |
| Babil | 46 | 40 | 8 |
| Diyalah | 46 | 43 | 7 |
| Karbala | 44 | 40 | 7 |
| Kirkuk | 44 | 65 | 10 |
| Muthanna | 44 | 45 | 7 |
| Wasit | 44 | 37 | 9 |
| Anbar | 43 | 57 | 9 |
| Maysan | 43 | 29 | 4 |
| Dhi Qar | 42 | 31 | 8 |
| Nineveh | 42 | 53 | 10 |
| Qadisiyah | 42 | 38 | 8 |
| Najaf | 41 | 32 | 8 |
| Basra | 40 | 43 | 11 |
| Baghdad-al-Karkh | 34 | 32 | 16 |
| Baghdad-al-Rusafa | 31 | 21 | |

However, the turnout in Kirkuk, Salahuddin, Anbar, and Nineveh provinces differed, ranging from 53-65 percent, contributing to an overall increase in turnout across Iraq. This can be attributed to the intensification of ethnic-religious rivalries and the fierce competition among coalitions. Except for Salahaddin, turnout was higher in provinces with more electoral coalitions. Provinces like Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, and Nineveh, which had a high number of coalitions, witnessed elevated turnout. In all of these provinces, except the Rasafa sector in Baghdad, the turnout was high.