
Numbers and Signs in Iraqi Provincial Elections

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Summary : The series of declines in voter turnout follows the tradition of the previous four terms, as shown: in the 2005 elections: 76%, in 2010: 62%, in 2014: 61%, in 2018: 44%, and in 2021: 43%.

After the announcement of the preliminary results of the provincial elections on December 18, 2023, the unchanged rates and anticipated developments before the election may become more consolidated. This could persist until unexpected surprises and new consequences emerge, some of which will be discussed:

The series of declines in voter turnout follows the tradition of the previous four terms, as shown: in the 2005 elections: 76%, in 2010: 62%, in 2014: 61%, in 2018: 44%, and in 2021: 43%. In the most recent election, the turnout was officially determined at 41%. However, the latter two figures do not accurately reflect the real voters. For instance, out of the total 24,667,000 eligible voters, only 6,599,000 people actually voted, constituting 26.7% of those eligible. This results in a boycott rate of 73.3%.

Among themselves the Shiite emerged triumphant, marking the first instance of a major political coalition within the Shiite Framework competing against each other in 13 provinces before ultimately uniting. Influential social figures have been nominated to leverage their positions in the competition. Despite the local nature of the process, the election program and campaign have played a negligible role. Instead, discussions have primarily focused on land distribution, privileges, and employment, potentially complicating the government's responsibilities in the upcoming phase. This not only heightens public expectations but also has the potential to erode confidence in the 2025 elections.

It appears that the political rival of the Shiite Framework, Sadr, has shifted his approach from electoral competition to attempting to disrupt and replace them in the political process. Sadr has declined to enhance the political process through elections, causing deep concern among his rivals. They worry that voters, who primarily support parties and lists, may not accurately reflect public opinion. Sadr could potentially leverage the "silent majority" list, consisting of those who did not participate in the elections.

Several governors outside political coalitions emerged victorious in the election, including those in Anbar, Kut (Wasit), and Karbala. Notably, Asaad al-Eidani, the governor of Basra, secured 12 seats out of 22 with a record-breaking 156,470 votes. In contrast, the governor of Baghdad only received 3,000 votes out of 9 million. This indicates a shift where service-oriented discourse is competing with political and religious narratives. A similar trend is observed in Nineveh with Najm Juburi, demonstrating the effectiveness of an executive governor over a political one.

Within the Shiite community, Maliki's performance fell short of expectations, even with the Sadrist's boycotting the election, despite being traditional rivals. Despite winning over 530,000 votes, the "State of Law" coalition secured only third place in Baghdad and Basra. In the capital, it did not surpass the list of Halbousi, obtaining 35 seats out of 275 in 15 provinces. Maliki's coalition only dominated in Muthanna province, primarily comprising the impoverished, losing influence in Karbala province, where it has had a historic position since 2005.

In the Shiite equation, the Hakim-Abadi joint list, named "State Forces," aimed to recover from the 2021 defeat, securing 23 seats and claiming a "restored position." However, this doesn't bring them close to the overall 275 seats, especially considering the absence of Sadrist. The coalition secured the second position in just one province and ranked third in two others. They garnered approximately 308,000 votes, with less than 70,000 votes in Baghdad, where Ammar al-Hakim resides and known as Abadi's city.

The Shiite armed political forces, forming the "Nabani" coalition led by Amiri, alongside Khazali and allied with the "Islamic Resistance," secured over 638,000 votes across all provinces. Despite clinching the top position in five provinces (Dhi Qar, Maysan, Babil, Diwaniya, Najaf), they fell short of surpassing Halbousi in Baghdad and Asaad al-Eidani in Basra. These votes signify a shift in the Shiite political landscape, once dominated by traditional forces like the Da'wah Party, the Supreme Islamic Council, and the Sadr Movement. Now, the Nabani coalition stands as the largest winning Shiite alliance. Challenges lie ahead, particularly in facing Halbousi's resistance in Baghdad and countering the governor's list in areas not compositionally mixed. Despite the setback of Shiite lists against Halbousi's list in Baghdad, the overall tally for Shiite lists

remains over 430,000 votes, surpassing the 380,000 votes of the major Sunni lists. However, forming a local government in Baghdad will encounter numerous obstacles.

The initial trial of the Civil Forces Coalition under the "Qiam" framework, featuring the participation of the Communist Party, garnered over 100,000 votes across all provinces. Although they secured the third position in Diwaniyah, results in other provinces were varied. This reflects the distrust of civil Iraqi activities in the significance of elections and the effectiveness of their boycott calls, given the perceived lack of equal opportunities, dominance of weapons, money, and religious discourse. This situation once again raises concerns about the potential resurgence of demonstrations like those happened in October 2019.

In the Sunni provinces, efforts to replace Halbousi proved unsuccessful. The outcomes for the ousted Speaker of Parliament were extraordinary, with significant surprises, notably the triumph in Baghdad, an important and symbolic achievement in intense competition. Similarly, in Anbar, Halbousi dispelled claims of his political demise, securing a total vote exceeding 483,000. In contrast, Halbousi's rivals, like al-Hassam and a broad front of Sunni political forces, managed only 177,000 votes in Baghdad and western Iraq, ranking sixth and seventh in all provinces.

In Kirkuk, the coalition, and the list of Kurdish parties, by securing seven out of 15 seats, now hold 47% of the seats. This is a decrease from the previous 63% they held in the provincial council and maintaining 50% in all Iraqi elections since 2005. Despite this decline, there's an opinion that the elections revitalized Kurdish identity in the city, emphasizing that the future administration will inevitably involve Kurds and align with Kurdish will, contrary to the narrative that emerged after 2017.

Regardless of the results in Kirkuk, compromise is crucial, as Article 13 of the third amendment to Law No. 12 of 2018, paragraph 2, states that election results won't serve as the foundation for any legal or administrative situation. In the third paragraph, it emphasizes that these principles persist for subsequent elections of the House of Representatives and the provincial council. Article 4 further specifies that power distribution will be fair among the communities of the province, irrespective of election outcomes.

In other conflict areas, aside from Kirkuk, the increasing influence of Arab and Shiite lists, coupled with the strengthening of Shiite actors post-2017 and 2018, has intensified pressure on the Kurds as follows:

-In Nineveh, the representation of Kurdish forces in the previous council decreased from 31 percent to 23.5 percent, with the KDP securing four seats and the PUK two, averaging around 174,000 Kurdish votes.

-In Diyala, the Kurdish community secured one Kurdish seat, belonging to the PUK, with a total of 31,000 Kurdish votes. This is a change from the previous council where three seats were held by Kurdish lists (2 PUK and 1 KDP).

-In Salahaddin, the PUK secured only one seat in the former governor's coalition, "The National People." The votes of all Kurdish candidates, distributed among local coalitions, amounted to less than 40,000, resembling the 2013 scenario when they won only one seat out of 29. This marks a decline from the 2009 provincial council elections when the Kurdish coalition won two seats.