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INSIGHT

Iraq's 2018 Elections

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Iraqis are voting in national, regional, and provincial elections in 2018 as they seek to consolidate the country's military victory over the forces of the Islamic State, rebuild shattered communities, and improve government performance. On May 12, Iraqi voters went to the polls to choose national legislators for four-year terms in the 329-seat Council of Representatives (COR), Iraq's unicameral legislature. The Kurdistan Regional Government has proposed holding long-delayed legislative and executive elections on September 30, with nationwide provincial council elections set for December. Observers have been surprised by a lower than expected voter turnout and by preliminary results showing that Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr's list appears set to win the most seats overall.

Iraq's Electoral System

Voters in Iraq's 18 governorates selected their preferred political list and/or candidate in the May 2018 COR election, with seats awarded proportionally on a complex formula basis. Some Iraqis have criticized the electoral formula as biased toward larger parties. Once ratified, the COR election results will inform the selection of a new prime minister and cabinet, with nominees determined through coalition negotiations among the various parties, lists, and candidates. One quarter of the COR seats are reserved for women and nine seats are reserved for representatives of minority groups, including Christians and Yazidis.

Preliminary Results

Most candidates and coalitions adopted campaign rhetoric reflecting the anticorruption, pansectarian, and proreform aspirations of popular protest movements, although coalition platforms and mobilization strategies were defined by a mix of new appeals and established methods. Overall, turnout declined considerably from levels in 2005, 2010, and 2014, with 44.5% of more than 23 million registered Iraqi voters participating. Analysts attribute the decline to abstentions and an organized boycott, voter disillusion and fatigue, the unpopularity of incumbents and establishment candidates, technical and

administrative failures, and continuing internal displacement. Voters did not choose candidates strictly on ethnic or sectarian lines and demonstrated a range of candidate and list preferences within communal groups.

Preliminary results show the *Sa'irun* (On the March) coalition led by Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr's *Istiqama* (Integrity) list set to win more than 50 seats and the most overall. *Sa'irun* leveraged a unique slate of new candidates to distinguish itself and campaigned on an anticorruption and service delivery platform.

Preliminary results and local press reports differ over whether the next-highest number of seats will go to the *Fatah* (Conquest) coalition led by Badr Organization and former Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) leader Hadi al Ameri or the *Nasr* (Victory) coalition led by Prime Minister Haider al Abadi. Abadi's inclusive, Shia-led list earned the most votes in predominantly Sunni Ninewa governorate, home to the city of Mosul, but fell short in Baghdad and other areas. The Fatah list includes candidates with ties to Iran who oppose close relations with the United States.

Former prime minister Nouri al Maliki's State of Law coalition, Ammar al Hakim's *Hikma* (Wisdom) list, and Iyad Allawi's *Wataniya* (National) list also are projected to have 20 or more seats. Among Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) won the most seats, while *Wataniya* and smaller Kurdish opposition lists have joined together to condemn alleged vote tampering and to demand cancellation of the results.

Government Formation and Prominent Issues

After results are finalized, the newly constituted COR is required within 15 days to choose a speaker and two deputies by a majority of its members (165 votes). Within 30 days from the date of result certification, the COR is to choose a new national president by a two-thirds majority (220 votes). Within 15 days of that choice, the new president is to direct the prime minister-designate nominee of the largest negotiated COR bloc to form a government. Within 30 days of being designated, the designee must present a cabinet platform and slate of ministers for COR confirmation by majority vote.

Iraqi analysts note that election results are one reference point for postelection government formation negotiations among Iraq's political factions, and underscore that vote totals may not directly determine the leadership or the final makeup of Iraq's next government. Electoral lists may combine or fracture during negotiations aimed at creating blocs in the COR. Analysts are discussing various scenarios and expect negotiations to remain fluid and somewhat opaque. Some scenarios project a status quo result based on an expansive but fragile coalition government, while others consider alternate coalitions that could include or exclude different parties. Observers have identified some possible candidates for prime minister, but negotiations could last for weeks or longer. Prime Minister Abadi could return under some scenarios, but the makeup of the governing coalition will determine its viability and freedom of action on controversial issues.

The following issues were relevant in the campaign and are expected to factor into negotiations:

- Stabilization and Reconstruction
- Security and the Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces
- Economic Development, Corruption, and Fiscal Policy
- Relations between the National Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government

Outlook and Implications for the United States

Iraq's election was carried out without major security disruptions, and most leading factions and figures have made statements accepting the somewhat unexpected result. While exhibiting lower turnout than in the past, Iraq's 2018 COR election was "largely peaceful and orderly," and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq has called on election officials "to act expeditiously in order to seriously address all complaints." Prime Minister Abadi has expressed his desire to see U.S. and other international military support for Iraq's security forces continue. *Sa'irun* leader Muqtada al Sadr remains critical of U.S. policy toward Iraq and the broader Middle East, but has not called for the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces. It remains to be seen whether a coalition government featuring Sadr's movement and/or members of the *Fatah* or State of Law coalitions might seek to substantially revise or reverse current patterns of U.S.-Iraq cooperation. Senior officials from Iran and the United States have visited Iraq in the wake of the election and consulted with leading political figures.

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