**Iraqi Parliamentary Elections Update, May 18**

With the Election in the rearview the complicated process of forming a government will soon be underway. Here are some observations from the Election in Iraq.

**Winners and Losers**

Muqtada al-Sadr’s Sairoon lil-Islah (Marching for Reform) Alliance has emerged as surprising victor, but no party or coalition has a clear path to bring immediate change to the government. Sadr is followed by al-Fatah (Conquest), the coalition largely made up former PMUs led by Hadi al-Ameri. Rounding out the top five vote getters are Prime Minister Abadi’s Nasr (Victory) Alliance, former Prime Minister Nouri Maliki’s State of Law Coalition, and Al-Wataniya led by Ayad Allawi. With an estimated 54-56 seats, Sairoon is well short of a majority and it is possible that the electoral alliance will not form the largest parliamentary bloc which chooses the next prime minister and government. Iraqi news has reported that already Mr. Maliki and Mr. Ameri have met to discuss the possibility of allying with Abadi in an effort to form the largest parliamentary bloc and sideline Sadr. In the north, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) won easily in Erbil and Dohuk while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was first in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, and second in Erbil. The PUK wins in Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah have been called into question by many parties, sparking violence and much distrust in the process.

**Low Turnout**

There are many possible causes for record low turnout (44.5%): apathy and a lack of trust in the political class; suspicion of the new voting process, new technology and the IHEC in general; the large number of remaining internally displaced; problems related to new identification cards and procedures; and, vehicle bans and transportation difficulties in some urban areas. Iraq election law does not demand a turnout threshold for elections to be legal and binding, but the low turnout in combination with the ongoing accumulation of complaints from nearly all quarters will fuel arguments against the political legitimacy of the election and next government. Particularly troubling is the turnout among women and youth, which did not exceed 35 percent according to an IHEC representative.

**Why?**

Detailed and official election results are still unavailable so any analysis on turnout and performance is speculative. Some trends, however, were visible. Pre and post-election messaging from the IHEC was poor, leading to confusion, a lack of consistency and diminished confidence in the process. After publicly stating with much fanfare that election results would be available ‘within hours,’ a credible and comprehensive summary of results was not available five days later with no cogent explanation as to why. Too many systematic and technology changes were introduced in a very limited timeframe in the challenging post-ISIS environment. While there were some technical glitches, the real problem is the lack of confidence among voters in the process. This opened up the opportunity for losers to blame the IHEC and process for their losses.

The unexpectedly poor performance of the Prime Minister’s coalition could be linked to: overconfidence; messaging that did not distance himself from ‘the establishment’ and an unpopular government; lacking campaign infrastructure and internal cohesiveness, and the diversity of the list being accompanied by the lack of a truly unifying cause.

The unexpectedly high performance of the Sadr coalition could be linked to: consistent messaging on an issue of importance to all – corruption; nationalist profile; a loyal base that did not disappoint in a low turnout election; and, maintaining support and organizational infrastructure when other Shia parties fractured. Conventional wisdom dictated that this would be a ‘status quo’ election with 2020 being the real ‘change’ year, but with no immediate crisis there was no pressure among voters to retreat to the familiar.

**Low Violence on Election Day**

After a campaign marked by localized violence including targeted killing or wounding of MPs in Abbar, Kirkuk, and Baghdad, and defamation of several women candidates, there were no widespread terrorist attacks on election day. However, ISIS attacks against security forces and polling stations were reported in Diyala, Kirkuk and Salahuddin provinces. Other cases of violence have been politically motivated or related to civil unrest. This can be expected to continue in as election results continue to be called into question and the process of forming a government moves forward. In Sulaymaniyah, on the night of elections, allegedly PUK Peshmerga shot at the Goran HQ, shattering windows and damaging offices in which there were present party organizers. Unrest in Kirkuk city was related to the unexpected PUK win. After thousands of angry PMUs and locals marched to the local IHEC branch, the governor of Kirkuk declared a curfew and ordered a manual recount of votes, saying an electronic counting system had produced an “illogical” result.

**Political Reactions**

Immediately after the announcement of preliminary results, Mr. Sadr expressed intention to form a technocratic government. Prime Minister Abadi has been generally conciliatory. In a televised speech he spoke of unity and cooperation with election victors, mentioning the issue of corruption – Mr. Sadr’s signature issue – several times. His tone took a sharp turn, however, on May 16, he called for a manual recount citing high-profile charges of tampering in Kirkuk. He also complained about the lack of an independent audit to check elections technology. In Kurdistan, the KDP also called for a manual recount (even though the results clearly affirmed its dominance in the region), linking the ‘suspicious results’ to security in the region.

While most of the criticism in non-KRG provinces has been reserved for the IHEC and the process in general, in Kurdistan all parties are openly accusing each other of fraud. The alternatives offered by losing parties (and, in the case of KDP, winners as well) range from boycotting the political process, to conducting a manual recount, to installing a caretaker government until a new election can be held. There does not appear to be any public appetite for another election.

**Next Steps**

As electoral coalitions begin to form larger parliamentary blocs for the purposes of forming a government, an unlimited number of possibilities emerge. Current alliances may break apart, which is even more likely given the diverse makeup of the electoral lists. There are no penalties for MPs to change allegiance for key positions or to defect to their traditional ethnic or sectarian blocs. None of the main coalitions will likely accept exclusion from the government as the benefits of an administration portfolio are obvious. Abadi will remain in office and retain all powers of the prime minister until a new government is formed, which could put him in a strong negotiating position.

**Election Turnout:**

* 2018 44.50%
* 2014 60.53%
* 2010 62.40%
* 2005 79.63%

**Preliminary Unofficial Results:**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2014 Party/Coalition** | **2018 Party/Coalition** | **2014 Results** | **2018 Results** |
| Al Ahrar (Sadr) |  | 34 | NA |
|  | Sairoon Lil Slah (Sadr, Communist, others) | NA | 56 |
| Al Mowaten (ISCI) |  | 29 | NA |
|  | Al Fateh (Badr, ISCI, PMF-linked entities, others) | NA | 54 |
|  | Hikma (Ammar al Hakim) | NA | 16 |
| State of Law (Maliki) | State of Law (Maliki) | 92 | 26 |
|  | Al Nasr | NA | 46 |
| Wataniya (Allawi) | Wataniya (Allawi, Mutlaq, Salim Juburi) | 21 | 22 |
| Mutahidoon (O Nujaifi) |  | 23 | 17 |

[Unofficial results per governorate](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1UGbXvt4FjnE-bOQHcgBzSmB-jvn_DmfJSbn0rrRmWU8/edit#gid=0)