

Low turnout in Iraqi provincial elections

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The low turnout for the elections held in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces last Saturday underscored the enduring hostility of the Iraqi people toward the US occupation and their alienation from the political system that has been imposed on the country. According to initial estimates, just 51 percent of registered voters cast a ballot. Turnout in the December 2005 national election was 79.6 percent.

The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had predicted that between 70 and 80 percent would vote last Saturday. Instead, the turnout was even lower than the 58 percent participation in the national and provincial elections in January 2005. That poll was boycotted by hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, especially Sunnis, in protest over the US destruction of the city of Fallujah and the brutal suppression of the anti-occupation resistance.

Without even waiting to analyse the results, sections of the US media initially hailed the elections as proof that close to six years of US military operations had transformed Iraq into a stable democracy. The tone changed as it became obvious there was no enthusiasm among the Iraqi people.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote on Monday that the turnout had failed "to meet expectations". A British-based academic on Iraqi politics, Toby Dodge, told Reuters: "The lower turnout I think would reflect cynicism but also world-weariness with the vote. You had that huge tide of expectation in 2005... and that crashed against the reality of a fairly incompetent ruling elite."

Even a legislator of Maliki's Da'wa Party, Ali al-Adeeb, commented to McClatchy Newspapers: "There was a mood of apathy before the elections. Many asked themselves—what is the good, why should we vote and for what?"

The barely mentioned reality is that Iraq has been devastated and much of its population of 26 million reduced to utter misery. Over 1.2 million have been killed, a similar number are disabled with horrific injuries and some 4 million are refugees in neighbouring countries or classified as "internally displaced persons". A vast

amount of personal property has been destroyed or damaged.

Even before the impact of the global recession, over 50 percent of the workforce was unemployed or underemployed. People in Iraq's cities cannot rely on the provision of basic services such as health care, electricity, trash collection, a functioning sewerage system and even clean water—services that are essential to civilised life.

Discontent and unrest is only restrained by exhaustion after years of death and destruction, and the repressive role of about 140,000 American troops and 500,000 soldiers, police and militiamen loyal to the various factions within the pro-US Iraqi government. Moreover, a political perspective is lacking as to how to end US domination. Millions of people are preoccupied with rebuilding their shattered lives and have no confidence in any of the 100 or so parties contesting the election.

Some of the lowest voter turnouts were recorded in the provinces where the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr once had a broad following among the working class due to its populist denunciations of the occupation and professed concern for the plight of the poor. Over the past three years, support for the Sadrists has been largely shattered by a combination of US and Iraqi government repression and the incorporation of most of its leadership into the US-established state. Moqtada al-Sadr eventually left the country some time in 2007 to undertake religious studies in Iran.

The Sadrists did not stand any candidates in the elections under their own banner. From his self-imposed exile, Sadr called on Iraqis to vote for the candidates of two independent Shiite lists. Instead, voters stayed away in large numbers.

In Basra and Maysan provinces, where Maliki ordered major military operations in early 2008 against Sadrist-influenced Shiite militiamen, the turnout was 48 and 46 percent respectively. In Baghdad, where one third of the population lives in the densely populated and poverty-stricken former Sadrist stronghold of Sadr City that was besieged by US troops last year, just 40 percent

voted—half as many as in the December 2005 election.

Early indications from Baghdad and the nine predominantly Shiite southern provinces suggest that Maliki's Da'wa Party received the largest percentage of votes at the expense of the other main Shiite party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). For the past four years, ISCI has controlled most of the southern provinces, except Basra and Maysan.

The strengthened position for Da'wa in the south has been attributed in some media reports to popular support for Maliki's crackdown against the Sadrist militias last year and his attempt to portray himself as a new Iraqi nationalist strongman, as well as to the level of corruption in the ISCI-run provincial administrations and dissatisfaction with the state of services.

It is clear, however, that the main factor is the alienation among millions of Iraqi Shiites whose lives have been devastated by close to six years of US occupation and no longer support any faction of the Shiite political establishment. Maliki's party simply received the largest share of a sharply reduced vote.

Sadrist-backed independents won some representation in most provinces and an independent list with no links to either Da'wa or the Sadrists reportedly won in the province of Karbala—the site of one of the two main Shiite shrines. The party headed by former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, who conspired with the Bush administration to fabricate the "weapons of mass destruction" case for the 2003 invasion, also reportedly increased its share of the vote.

The highest turnouts occurred in provinces with large Sunni Arab populations: Salah Ad Din (65 percent), Nineveh (60 percent) and Diyala (57 percent). In part, Sunni voters appear to have responded to a communal campaign to curb the influence of Kurdish nationalist parties. These parties already control the Kurdish autonomous region (KRG) in Iraq's north and aim to annex other northern areas, such as districts of Nineveh and the entire oil-rich province of Tamim and its capital Kirkuk.

Both Sunni and ethnic Turkomen parties openly campaigned on a program of stopping "Kurdish expansion". Whatever electoral gains they made will be presented as evidence that non-Kurds do not want to be part of a de-facto Kurdish state.

The ethnic tensions over the status of Kirkuk are in essence a conflict over which faction of the Iraqi elite will control the northern oilfields. The danger of open violence was considered so great that no vote was held for the

provincial government in Tamim. A resolution, however, cannot be delayed indefinitely and could trigger civil war between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region.

Violence also looms in the western province of Anbar, which was once the epicentre of Sunni resistance to the occupation. In January 2005, just 2 percent of the population voted and the pro-occupation Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) won complete control over the provincial government.

In last weekend's ballot, the IIP was opposed by the parties linked to the "Awakening" or Sahwa—the 100,000-strong tribal-based militia movement of former insurgents who were bribed by the US military in 2006 and 2007 to end their resistance. They have since turned areas of the province into virtual tribal fiefdoms.

The Sahwa sheiks claimed they would be swept into power at the elections. Instead, turnout in Anbar was just 40 percent and polls indicate that the IIP may have secured a majority. Tribal leaders have threatened to take up arms over what they allege is electoral fraud. Iraqi army units imposed a vehicle curfew across the province on Monday. As claim and counter-claim of victory and theft are made, the situation could rapidly deteriorate.

Putting to rest the talk of "stability" in Iraq, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, the second-in-command of US forces in Iraq, warned yesterday of the danger of unrest. He told journalists: "Only a fraction of those who competed will be elected. My hope is that those who are not elected will support those who are."

The US military, Austin declared, would intervene "to ensure that Iraq's enemies do not get the opportunity to threaten development". In other words, it will seek to crush any challenge to the fragile puppet state the US occupation has created.



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