

Iraq election entrenches communalist divisions

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With still less than 50 percent of the votes counted in the March 7 election in Iraq, initial reports indicate that none of the major political coalitions has won an outright majority in the parliament. Instead, the election has underscored the extent of the ethno-communal divisions that the US occupation has fomented and exploited to control the country.

Turnout in the election is estimated to have been 62 percent, compared with close to 80 percent in the previous ballot in December 2005. Hundreds of thousands of people were turned away from polling stations because their names did not appear on the electoral roll. Three independent Iraqi agencies that monitored the election have reported allegations of police or troops intimidating people into voting for the State of Law coalition headed by current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

A preliminary result is now expected to be announced on March 18. A final count is not expected until the end of the month.

So far, State of Law, which is dominated by Maliki's Shiite-based Da'wa Party, appears to have won at least 40 percent of the vote. It is leading the polling in at least seven of Iraq's 18 provinces, including Baghdad, where 70 of the parliament's 325 seats are elected. In Basra, the centre of the country's oil industry and where 24 legislators are elected, Maliki has reportedly won 63 percent of the vote. State of Law has also polled higher than its rivals in the majority Shiite-populated southern provinces of Babil, Najaf, Karbala, Wasit and Muthanna. Combined, these provinces elect 56 members of parliament.

On current trends, State of Law will be the largest faction in the parliament, holding as many as 100 seats. It

has not, however, achieved its stated aim of winning broad support among the Sunni Arab population, where the armed resistance to the US occupation had been centred.

The Iraqiya coalition, led by Iyad Allawi, has won the bulk of the votes in the majority Sunni Arab provinces of Anbar, Ninevah, Diyala and Salahaddin. It is also leading, by a narrow margin, in the northern oil-rich province of Tamim or Kirkuk. It is likely to win at least 80 seats in the parliament.

Allawi was installed by the Bush administration as the country's interim prime minister in 2004. Iraqiya's other main leader is current vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi, a prominent Sunni politician. Iraqiya campaigned as a nationalist and secular opposition to the dominance of the parliament by Shiite religious groupings. While it is polling third in Baghdad, it appears to have won at least 25 percent of the votes, primarily from Sunnis.

Among the Shiite population, Iraqiya polled poorly. It was portrayed by the Shiite parties as little more than a front for supporters of the former Baathist Party of Saddam Hussein and a representative of the old Sunni Arab ruling elite that ruthlessly suppressed dissent by Shiite fundamentalists. Hundreds of its candidates were prevented from standing by the Justice and Accountability Board, an anti-Baathist judicial body headed by Ali Faysal al-Lami, a prominent Shiite fundamentalist. Iraqiya's own propaganda, which accused the Shiite parties of being agents of the Iranian Shiite regime, only exacerbated the sectarian animosities between the Sunni and Shiite-based factions.

The main opposition to Maliki and State of Law in Shiite areas was the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a

coalition dominated by the two largest Shiite religious parties, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Early reports suggest that the INA won a substantial number of votes in Sadr City, the densely populated, working class and majority Shiite district of Baghdad. It also won the largest share of the votes in the southern provinces of Maysan, Dhi Qar and Al-Qadisiyyah. The INA is likely to win between 50 and 80 seats.

In the Kurdish-populated northern provinces of Irbil, Sulaymaniyyah and Duhok, the coalition of the main Kurdish nationalist parties has once again won the majority of the votes and will hold as many as 40 seats in the parliament. The opposition Kurdish-based Movement for Change appears to have won just 10 percent.

The fact that Iraqiya is leading the vote count in Kirkuk province has sent shockwaves through the Kurdish nationalist establishment, whose longstanding ambition is to incorporate the oil-rich area into the existing autonomous Kurdish region. Earlier counts had shown the Kurdish parties ahead, prompting one Kurdish politician, Mala Sirwan, to declare that the result proved that “Kirkuk is Kurds, it belongs to the Kurds, not to the Arabs”. Instead, it appears that the city is ethnically split, with Arab and Turkomen communities overwhelmingly voting for Iraqiya, which openly opposes the Kurdish claims on Kirkuk.

A representative of the Kurdish coalition, Khalid Shenawi, has publicly accused election officials in Kirkuk of fraud and stated that the result will be treated as “illegitimate” by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Tensions will be brought to breaking point if the new government excludes the Kurdish bloc and rejects the constitutional stipulation that a referendum be held in Kirkuk to decide whether the province will be incorporated into the KRG.

In summary, the election will produce another parliament dominated by sectarian and communalist factions of the Iraqi elite, each seeking to gain the maximum position and privilege at the expense of the others.

Intense manoeuvring to form a new government is already underway. Allawi, representing Iraqiya, is reportedly in negotiations with Maliki. At the same time,

he has held talks with the Shiite fundamentalist bloc. Maliki, for his part, is in talks with his Shiite rivals and the Kurdish nationalists.

There is little doubt that the Obama administration wants the next regime in Baghdad to be a coalition between Maliki and Allawi, rather than a combination that includes ISCI and the Sadrist tendency. During the election campaign, both US ambassador Christopher Hill and occupation commander General Raymond Odierno made clear that they are hostile to the Shiite religious parties, which maintain close links and sympathies with the Iranian government.

Always in the background of Washington’s calculations is the possibility of military action against Iran. The Sunni elite, which waged a US-backed eight-year war against Iran from 1980 to 1988 and rallied behind Allawi and Iraqiya in the election, constitutes their natural ally in Iraq against the Iranian Shiite regime. The US embassy and military commanders will be playing a major role in the negotiations now taking place.

Whatever government is formed from the sordid process, it will be highly unstable. It will have to preside over an economy in tatters, internal and regional tensions and widespread discontent. Far from the election signaling the triumph of “democracy” in Iraq, as touted by Obama and the American media, the next US puppet regime will be compelled to rely on repression to contain volatile social antagonisms and to meet Washington’s demands for the opening up of the oil industry and long-term military bases.



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