



türkiye ekonomi politikaları araştırma vakfı

## Iraqi Provincial Elections Provide Hope for the Future of the Country ...

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The most recent elections in Iraq have not yet been completed. It may take a few more weeks until the official results of the Iraqi provincial elections are announced mainly due to the complex nature of the new election system implemented in the country for the first time. The January 31 provincial council elections give hope that Iraq is ultimately going through a slow change.

Provincial elections that were held in fourteen of the eighteen provinces in Iraq last Saturday represent firsts from many perspectives and thus are highly important. Approximately 14.000 candidates and 400 party lists contested for seats in the local councils. This election was the most peaceful one since the US led invasion in 2003. It was also important for testing the power of different political parties and having an idea on the political tendencies at the national level. A crucial difference between the January 31 elections from the previous one in 2005 was that it was done for new councils whose authority and power were significantly enhanced.<sup>1</sup>

Probably the most important reason why the 2009 elections give hope for the future of Iraq is that the Sunnis who boycotted the 2005 elections have actively participated in 2009 elections. The decision of the Sunnis to participate in the process can be evaluated as an important development in that it paves the way for the better reflection of demographic and political realities of the region. Despite the significant increase in

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<sup>1</sup> As expressed in the comprehensive International Crisis Group report titled "Iraq's Provincial Elections: The Stakes", back in 2005 provincial councils had the authority to determine the priorities for the provinces, revise the annual local budget and generate/collect local revenues. The most important factor limiting their authority was the fact that they did not have full control over the local budget and that the local budget is mainly controlled by the central government. On the other hand, with the new changes in the law, local councils gained lots of powers. According to the new law, the local councils will now be able to elect and remove senior governorate officials including the governor; identify priorities in all fields, outline policy and develop strategic development plans in coordination with the competent deferral ministries; issue local legislation; and approve local security plans. In addition, the governorate's budget is now prepared by the governor, not federal ministries and ratified by the local councils.

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the number of Sunni voters, turnout rate at the national level has fallen down from 57 percent to 51 percent in the year 2009. This is mainly attributed to the increase in the number of disappointed Shiite voters.

Initial official results indicate that the support for religious parties have decreased and support for more secular parties giving prominence to issues such as unity, solidarity, public safety and strong central administration have increased. As an example, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and his Islamic Dawa Party have increased their votes considerably as compared to 2005 elections.<sup>2</sup> This increase can be attributed to various reasons. Maliki, especially after having launched military operations against Mukteda al Sadr's Mahdi Army, his operations against al-Qaeda in Iraq and his stance against the Kurdish peshmergas when necessary, put him at the same distance from different political groups and proved that he is not only a leader protecting only the Shiites' rights and interests but instead is a more national personality.

Another interesting development as a result of the latest elections is that the former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, who ran a more nationalist campaign, succeeded in getting votes from both Sunni and Shiite groups. Allawi's list named "Iraqia" and composed of liberal candidates had 13.9% of the votes in Salahaddin province. It was less likely for a candidate to receive votes from different political groups in the Iraq of a couple of years ago where the change was not felt this strong and sectarian conflict was more evident.

Religious parties on the other hand faced the exact opposite situation as a result of the latest elections. Although the 2005 elections brought success to religious parties at the local level, the unsatisfactory services, the rumors of corruption and a general state of dissatisfaction since then resulted in the loss of power for religious parties. These parties that pulled votes in 2005 by using religion have been rapidly losing votes in the new period. As an example, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) has lost most of the provinces won four years ago. In 2005, the ISCI had won the votes of the majority in six of the nine provinces with Shiite majority as well as in most of the important regions of Baghdad. In this election, however, the votes for the party decreased

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<sup>2</sup> His votes increased from 31.3% to 38% in Baghdad, from 4.8% to 12.5% in Babil, from 7.3% to 37% in Basra, from 2.4% to 17.7% in Maysan, from 12.1% to 23.1% in Qadisiya and from 4.8% to 15.3% in Wasit according to New York Times, Baghdad Bureau: Iraq from the Inside, "Election Results: Who is Up? Who is Down?", February 6 2009,

<http://baghdadbureau.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/06/election-results-whos-up-whos-down/>

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significantly in numerous provinces.<sup>3</sup> This party led by Abdul Aziz Al- Hakim lost the elections even in Najaf, in Al Hakim's place of birth.

### Comparison of Dawa and ISCI Votes for 2005 and 2009 Iraqi Provincial Elections in Selected Provinces

	2005		2009	
	Dawa	ISCI	Dawa	ISCI
<b>Baghdad</b>	31,30	54,90	38,00	5,40
<b>Babil</b>	4,80	36,50	12,50	8,20
<b>Basra</b>	7,30	48,70	37,00	11,60
<b>Muthanna</b>	9,70	19,50	10,90	9,30
<b>Najaf</b>	26,80	46,30	16,20	14,80
<b>Qadisiya</b>	12,10	53,60	23,10	11,70
<b>Wasit</b>	4,80	12,10	15,30	10,00

Similarly, the Iraqi Islamic Party, which is a Sunni Islamic party formed in 1960 taking advantage of public's turn to religion after the collapse of the regime, attained good results in Anbar and Diyala in 2005 elections. This year, however, votes for the Party in the aforementioned two provinces, and especially in Anbar, have diminished considerably. This year, parties composed of moderate Sunni and tribal candidates ranked at the top in Anbar. Again, the Shiite Fadhila Party, which is among the parties that use religion to gain power and that does not have a considerable political power apart from the governorship of Basra, completely disappeared with the most recent elections. The crushing defeat of this party infamous with the corruption charges brought against it proves that voters have learned not to fall so easily for religious exploitation.

In relation to the Kurdish votes, back in 2005, the Kurds received 75% of the votes in Ninewa mainly due to the Sunni boycott. In the new elections, their votes fell down to 25% mainly due to the Sunni decision to become fully involved in the process, reflecting a more balanced result more closely in line with the demographic make-up of

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<sup>3</sup> ISCI votes fell down from 54.9% to 5.4% in Baghdad, from 36.5% to 8.2% in Babil, from 48.7% to 11.6% in Basra, from 19.5% to 9.3% in Muthanna, from 46.3% to 14.8% in Najaf, and from 53.6% to 11.7% in Qadisiya. New York Times, Baghdad Bureau: Iraq from the Inside, "Election Results: Who is Up? Who is Down?", February 6, 2009, <http://baghdadbureau.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/06/election-results-whos-up-whos-down/>

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the province. Similarly in the Salahaddin province, the Kurdish parties who received 29.2% of the votes back in 2005 received 4.5% of the votes in 2009. In Diyala on the other hand, they managed to preserve their votes from 2005 at 17%.

All of these new developments such as the transfer of the votes from ISCI to the Dawa party, Sunni enfranchisement in provinces such as Ninewa, are signs of change and a more democratic transfer of powers in Iraq. These developments also imply that the regionalization approach, which is more commonly advocated by the ISCI, Fadhila and Kurdish parties, has not received enough support from the voters and that the ballot box indicates a majority advocating centralization and a unified Iraq.

Another striking point about the 2009 elections was the high number of independent candidates. Since the previous elections, around 300 new democratic and liberal groups have emerged. For instance, a secular candidate, Yousef Majid al-Habboubi, managed to beat the Dawa party candidate and become elected in Karbala, Maliki's own place of birth. This emerging interest for independent candidates can be perceived as the desire of the Iraqis to search different alternatives to the ruling parties. It should be noted, however, that the new electoral system with its option to elect independent candidates without stating a party name, can sometimes be abused by the ruling parties that are losing popularity. It is a common practice that elected independent candidates re-join their old parties. Furthermore, the high number of independent candidates and the election threshold system implemented in the country imply bigger possibility of the division of votes to the advantage of bigger parties.

In general terms, 2009 elections enabled the emergence of candidates that are more representative, closer to the public, better equipped and more "home-grown" when compared to the candidates from the earlier election. The latest elections eliminated the non-representation problem that emerged as a result of the Sunni Arab boycott in 2005. This time, the majority of the voters went to the polls with great excitement as they believed that they can create a real change.

These are very favorable and important developments for a country which until one and a half year ago was shaking with a sectarian conflict. 2009 elections might be representing a significant amicable transformation in Iraqi history. It seems that the

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armed conflicts on the streets have shifted towards a more political level. Provincial elections of January 31st were one of the important examples of this shift.

There are still question marks in relation to the future of Iraq. The fact that the elections were not held in three northern provinces as well as in Kirkuk continues to raise doubts regarding the unity of country. In addition to this, the Dawa party of Maliki ranked the first in nine provinces but did not gain the absolute majority to rule the provinces on its own without establishing coalitions.

Nonetheless, the fact that the provincial elections of January 31<sup>st</sup> were carried out without facing a serious danger and that all groups within the country were able to vote contributes to the impression that there is a power shift in the country from the streets to the ballot box. Since there are few examples in the Arab world where the rulers can be changed by a democratic process, Iraq, if the success can be maintained, is taking quick steps towards being a role model as an Arab country. The variety and the qualifications of the candidates in the latest elections give hope about the positive role that Iraq can play in the future. Now, the recently elected provincial councils have a vital role to assume. If the new councils serve the public well, the support and faith of the voters for the democratic process will be enhanced and Iraq will continue to proceed in the right direction.