



FACT SHEET: IRAQ'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

BACKGROUND

Despite facing a violent insurgency that has shown few signs of winding down, Iraq has managed to adhere to an ambitious timetable for democratization. Elections on January 30, 2005, produced the country's 275-member Transitional National Assembly, which, in turn, selected a shared executive and drafted—in a series of contentious sessions and amid delays—an Iraqi constitution. Iraqis returned to the polls on October 15, 2005, and awarded the constitution narrow approval. Neither of these elections was flawless. Sunni participation was largely absent in the January elections, and, in October, a belated, largely Sunni campaign against the constitution came close to achieving its rejection. Some Sunnis have asserted that the October elections—especially in the deciding Ninawa province—were fraudulent, despite UN guarantees to the contrary. Still, the elections should be considered relatively successful. The numerous Iraqis who braved insurgent threats in January and October—with respective turnout rates of 58 and 63 percent—demonstrate the commitment of many citizens to this process. This commitment, as well as the relative calm in which the last two elections were conducted, should allow a cautious optimism when considering the next and final phase of the country's formal democratization: parliamentary elections on December 15.

SHAPE OF THE PARLIAMENT

Iraq's sitting parliament, the Transitional National Assembly, was elected in January with a mandate to select an initial executive, draft a constitution, and convene elections for a permanent body, the Council of Representatives. These elections will be held on December 15. The Council is a unicameral chamber comprised of 275 seats whose members are elected to four-year terms. The Iraqi constitution assigns legislative, treaty, and budgetary authority to the body, as well as the right to approve the council of ministers and other specific appointees. Following the election, the Council of Representatives is required to convene by December 31.

ELECTIONS PROCEDURE

Iraqi elections are supervised by the Independent Electoral Commission for Iraq (IECI), which is independent of outside control and possesses adjudication rights in the event of legal challenges to the results.

Many commentators—including the UN envoy to Iraq—predict that the political process will continue to expand and that all factions of Iraqi society will participate in next week's elections. Iraq's population of 27 million counts 14 million eligible voters, and turnout is expected at least to surpass January's election, with some polls predicting much higher participation. The government has sought to promote public engagement and, with international partners, has sponsored a series of information sessions, as well as the distribution of posters and pamphlets to raise awareness of the vote. The elections will be conducted at 6,200 polling stations around the country.

Of the Council's 275 seats, 230 are divided amongst Iraq's 18 governorates (provinces) in proportion to voter registration figures. The remaining 45 places are divided between "compensatory" and "national" seats. Compensatory seats are awarded to political entities (parties, coalitions, etc.) that failed to gain seats at the governorate level but nonetheless secured votes beyond a certain threshold. This threshold is determined by dividing the national vote total by 275 (the number of seats on the Council). If a political entity wins a vote equal to this quotient, it wins one compensatory seat. Earning twice that number confers two seats, and so on. (For example, should 10 million Iraqis vote, the IECI will divide 10 million by 275 to determine a threshold of 36,364. Any entity winning 36,364 votes gains a seat; an entity with twice as many gains two.) Expatriate votes are also directed at

compensatory seats. National seats are awarded if the compensatory seats do not fill their 45 spots. In this case, the remaining seats are awarded to the entities that *did* win at the governorate level, but apportionment is based on *nation*-wide vote shares. This system appears rather complicated, which has resulted in some criticism. While it does enjoy a certain legitimacy by virtue of its Iraqi design, the process has been somewhat compromised by its late adoption (only three months prior to the election), and, in the eyes of some observers, by the fact that it does not explicitly reserve seats for minority groups. By mandating that one-third of candidate lists be women, however, the IECI hopes to ensure that women will comprise at least 25 percent of the Council.

There are 307 political groups that are registered with the IECI to stand in the election, as are 19 separate coalitions. The IECI is presently considering the disqualification of 150 candidates due to former links to Saddam Hussein's deposed Ba'ath Party, a final decision on which is forthcoming.

Possibly complicating the elections process is the rather sudden United Nations decision this week to fire Carina Perelli, head of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division, over a March report alleging frequent employee harassment. Ms. Perelli has been praised by President Bush and the National Democratic Institute, among others, for her role in organizing Iraq's previous elections, as well as those in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton has questioned the timing of the dismissal and suggested it could disrupt the vote, an assertion the United Nations rejects.

MONITORING

Thorough election monitoring is key to combating the perception of fraud, especially in the Sunni community. At least one prominent Iraqi politician, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim—the Shi'ite leader of the powerful Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq—has warned of possible cheating this December, although he did not elaborate. The State Department asserts that over 70,000 independent observers have been accredited to observe the election, with the non-governmental Iraqi Election Information Network reporting a 50 percent boost in monitors over October's referendum. Counting will take place in each polling station, with results forwarded to IECI, which must certify the results before the Council can convene.

Dangers of insurgent violence prevented international observers from monitoring all quarters of Iraq during past elections, and continuing fears of violence have resulted in a monitoring force that is comprised of many Iraqi nationals. The European Union, in particular, declined to send any monitors to Iraq, citing safety concerns, and has begun studying alternate methods of supporting the process.

SECURITY

Although violence did not disrupt the last two elections in Iraq on the scale promised by insurgents, Iraqi, U.S., and coalition leaders took preventive measures leading up to the votes that included border closures, curfews, and increased check-points, as well as some international troop increases. While officials have not given firm descriptions of next week's security precautions, general indications point to similar measures. The Iraqi Defense and Interior Ministries indicated that 200,000 policemen and commandos would be on hand on December 15, as would 146,000 Facility Protection Servicemen, and more than 100,000 soldiers, although the exact role, location, and capacity of these different actors has not yet been specified. The United States and coalition partners have not announced any plans to increase troop levels in advance of the election.