



EARLY NUMBERS SHOW IRAQIS MAY ADOPT NEW CONSTITUTION

October 17, 2005

Iraqi citizens went to the polls Saturday to vote "yes" or "no" to a new constitution. Early numbers showed a majority voted in favor of the document.

As vote-counting continued in Iraq on Monday, preliminary and unofficial results reportedly showed that Iraqis have approved a new constitution that some feel will bring together the country's three main ethnic groups and lead to a strong, democratic nation.

Millions of Iraqis, as many as two-thirds of those registered, turned out Saturday to vote on the draft. The document has the backing of the country's Shiite and Kurdish ethnic groups, who together make up about 80 percent of Iraq's population.

Sunni Arabs, who feared the constitution would solidify Shiite and Kurdish autonomy, had promised to vote down the document, but apparently failed to muster enough support for their efforts, reported the Associated Press.

Praise for the vote

The Iraqi Independent Electoral Commission is expected to announce official results of the vote as early as Wednesday.

Two-thirds of voters in at least three of Iraq's 18 provinces have to vote "no" on the constitution for it to fail. If they do approve the document, Iraqis will head to the polls again by Dec. 15 to elect a new parliament. The new administration would be Iraq's first permanent government since U.S. forces ousted former dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

"The constitution is a sign of civilization," Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said after casting his vote. "This constitution has come after heavy sacrifices. It is a new birth."

President Bush said Sunday at the White House, "This is a very positive day for the Iraqis and as well for world peace," Reuters news reported.

Sunni Arabs have been promised they can propose constitutional amendments in the first four months of the new parliament if they are unhappy with the outcome.

Vote marred by violence

As the votes were being tallied, the United States and its allies in Iraq continued to fight with insurgents, who have launched attacks in several areas of the country leading up to the vote.

U.S. warplanes and helicopters bombed two villages near the city of Ramadi, west of Baghdad, killing an estimated 70 insurgents, the military said Monday. Witnesses said at least 39 of those killed were civilians.

And on referendum day, a roadside bomb killed five U.S. soldiers in a vehicle on the outskirts of Ramadi, a stronghold of Sunni insurgents.

-- Compiled from wire reports and other media sources for NewsHour Extra

© 2005 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions