



IRAQIS VOTE ON DIRECTION OF COUNTRY

December 14, 2005

This week's parliamentary elections in Iraq hold clues to the direction of democracy in the Middle East and the status of U.S. troops.

As Iraqis around the country and throughout the world cast votes for representatives in the National Assembly, Americans on both sides of the debate over the war are looking at the outcome as an important step toward withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq.

What are the elections about this time?

In January 2005, over 8 million Iraqis elected a temporary parliamentary body that was tasked with drafting a constitution.

Iraqi citizens went to polling booths in October and voted in favor of the new constitution, paving the way for this week's full-term parliamentary elections.

At stake are the 275 seats representing 18 provinces in the National Assembly. Each seat has a four-year term.

Unlike the January elections, when many Sunni Arabs boycotted the process, Thursday's turnout is expected to be exceptionally high.

Any Iraqi 18 years or older can vote, provided he or she show a passport, certificate of citizenship, or military papers.

There are an estimated 1.5 million Iraqis living abroad who are voting in polling centers in 15 countries.

In the parliamentary system, Iraqis vote for a party to represent their province, instead of choosing a specific candidate. For each province, the percentage of total votes each party receives translates to the number of representatives in the National Assembly.

Candidates, therefore, are campaigning on behalf of certain parties, urging their supporters to vote for their party to increase their chances of being elected to office.

The dangers of an Iraqi election

As with earlier elections, Iraqi forces and coalition troops are increasing security measures to try to prevent insurgent attacks. The country's borders with other nations were shut down earlier this week to try to keep insurgents from entering Iraq.

Additional temporary restrictions have been put in place. Iraqis cannot move between provinces, car travel is banned and there is a night curfew.

Al-Qaida in Iraq, the insurgency group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, issued a statement calling the election a “satanic project.”

Insurgents killed a Sunni Arab candidate earlier this week, and another attack against a Shiite candidate failed.

Eleven members of a secular (non-religious) party led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi were recently killed, in addition to two candidates in a Kurdish party in northern Iraq.

Political Parties

There are 226 registered political parties representing more than 7,000 candidates for the National Assembly.

The parties have organized themselves in an assortment of voting blocs, based on their view on various issues, including how much religion should influence government affairs and the status of U.S. troops.

The **United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)** represents the Shiite religious parties and received 48 percent of the vote in the January elections. Their top official, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, is the current Prime Minister of Iraq. They believe in giving more self-governing power to the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north.

The **Kurdistan Alliance** includes the two leading Kurdish parties. Their leader is Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. They hope to protect the autonomy of the northern regions in the new Iraqi government.

The **Iraqi National List** is led by former prime minister Allawi and seeks to create a democratic and secular Iraqi state. Of all the political blocs, this group’s platform is the most in line with the Bush administration’s vision of post-war Iraq.

The **National Congress Coalition** claims to be an alternative to the UIA in that they believe that Iraq should be a secular state that does not establish Islam as the official religion. Their leader is Ahmad Chalabi, a former Iraqi official who has been blamed for misleading U.S. intelligence officials in the run-up to the war.

The **Iraqi Accordance Front** represents the leading Sunni Arab parties. They are strongly against the U.S. presence in Iraq and want to revise the Iraqi constitution to give more representation to ethnic minorities.

Importance for Bush administration

The results of the elections and the ease with which the newly elected National Assembly takes control of the country will be major factors in how soon U.S. troops will withdraw from Iraq.

Should the Sunni Arabs win a significant number of seats, they will pressure the government to expel coalition troops.

Some experts have predicted that if Sunnis have a larger say in national policy, the insurgency will lose support accordingly.

Critics of the war in the United States have called for an immediate withdrawal of troops following the elections.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is opposed to giving a timetable for troop withdrawal, which he says would give insurgents too much information, but did suggest that the Pentagon would reduce troop levels from 160,000 to 137,000 soldiers following the election.

--Compiled by Brian Wolly for NewsHour Extra

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