

## Extra Feature Story

### Provincial Elections Test Iraq's Move Towards Democracy

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**In an important marker of national stability, Iraq held its first nationwide elections since 2005 with voters casting ballots for candidates seeking office in 14 of the country's 18 provinces.**

With 51 percent of Iraq's registered voters showing up to the polls, voter turnout was lower than expected, according to the New York Times -- although the voting was reported to be peaceful and smooth.

Although it will take several days to count the ballots, Iraqi and international officials are calling the elections a success, noting the lack of any considerable violence or disruption.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called the elections "a victory," adding that it had been a "day of happiness for all the Iraqi people and all those that love Iraq."

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker hailed it as "the most important election to take place since the fall" of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

#### Election Day

In anticipation of any violence or civil disturbances, Iraq prepared for election day by beefing up security throughout the country. The government instituted curfews, banned traffic on the streets of major cities, and set up a large Iraqi police and U.S. military presence at polling locations.

This year's election was the first time that Iraq used a voter registration process modeled after the one used in the U.S. Voters registered in advance and were then given polling locations based on their address.

With the exception of a few complaints that the names of some voters were left off the poll books, most observers described the voting process as fair and corruption-free.

#### Provincial Councils

Iraq is divided into 18 provinces led by governing bodies called provincial councils that oversee the budget and infrastructure projects. In Saturday's elections, more than 14,000 candidates ran for only 440 empty seats on the councils.

Although about 400 different parties make up the councils, three parties have thus far dominated the political landscape based around traditional religious and ethnic divisions. The majority Shiite sect is represented by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Dawa party and the more religious Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. The Iraqi Islamic Party represents the minority Sunni group.

## **Sunni Participation**

Protesting what they believed to be oppression by Iraq's majority Muslim Shiite sect, many of the minority Sunnis boycotted the elections in 2005. As a result, Sunni lawmakers have been underrepresented in the Iraqi government.

Voter turnout in the Anbar province, inhabited mainly by Sunnis, increased from 2 percent in the 2005 elections to 40 percent on Saturday, according to the Los Angeles Times. Many expect that Saturday's elections will increase their representation on the councils.

Early poll results show an increasing interest in more independent and secular political parties, an indication that Iraqis are searching for alternatives to the religious extremism and divisiveness of previous years, according to the New York Times.

Iraqi legislator and independent party leader, Qassim Daoud, commented that, "the public are interested in services, and this election has shown them that they can change anything by democratic means if they are not satisfied."

## **The Administration's Reaction**

President Barack Obama congratulated the Iraqi people in a statement calling the elections an "important step forward" to establishing a self-sufficient Iraq.

Speaking on NBC Sunday, President Obama commended Iraqis for holding peaceful elections.

"I think that you have a sense now that the Iraqis just had a very significant election with no significant violence that we are in a position to start putting more responsibility on the Iraqis and that's good news not only for the troops on the ground but for the families who are carrying an enormous burden," he said.

When pressed about a campaign promise to withdraw soldiers from Iraq in 16 months, President Obama predicted that a significant number of troops would return home in the coming year.

**-- Compiled by Kate Stanton for NewsHour Extra**

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