

Capitol Hill Briefing Notes: Provincial Elections in Iraq

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“When the Surge in Iraq began in January 2007, no one imagined that two years later Iraq would plan and conduct provincial elections with limited Coalition assistance and presence, that those elections would proceed smoothly and peacefully, and that the United Nations special envoy would be able to certify its legitimacy immediately.”¹ While the peacefulness and legitimacy of the elections made for welcome and unexpected news, even more unexpected and welcome are the election’s returns. The Iraqi population demonstrated its understanding that democracy can provide for their needs as, throughout Iraq, they voted for nationalist and secular-leaning parties over the sectarian parties who won in the elections of 2005. In that vein, Iraqis voted out incumbents in the majority of provinces, in what appears to be a demand for action at the local level. Finally, the Sunni population of Iraq passed a major milestone in their reconciliation by electing a variety of political parties that illustrate the Sunnis’ diverse political appetites.

This paper will briefly discuss themes that highlight the significance of the 2009 Provincial Election results providing evidence based on the vote totals as certified by the Iraqi High Elections Committee (IHEC).

On January 31, 2009, Iraqi voters overwhelmingly chose nationalist, secular-leaning parties over sectarian parties. Prior to the 2009 elections, polling in Iraq suggested that a majority of the population favored secular parties over the sectarian parties that hold power based on the 2005 provincial elections. In response to the growing secular, nationalist attitude of the Iraqi population, many of the existing sectarian political parties reinvented their platforms, distancing themselves from their sectarian roots and portraying themselves as more nationalist.

This political shift from sectarian to secular is best illustrated by the pre-election efforts of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) in Diyala. The Sunni boycott of the 2005 election throughout Iraq provided the IIP a narrow victory as the dominant Sunni political party. However, Sunnis in Diyala and throughout

Iraq disapproved of the Islamist, foreign roots of the IIP, expressing open discontent with the party's performance between 2005 and 2009. Beginning in 2007, the IIP in Diyala allied itself with the grassroots Sunni anti-al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) movement. The Sunni fighters came from the major urban areas in Diyala and represented a large proportion of the province's Sunni population. As the Sunni fighters defeated AQI their popularity grew and the fighters began transitioning into politics in early 2008. By mid-2008, the IIP allied itself with the Diyala Reform Party that was founded by the leadership of the Sunnis fighters. The political coalition formed by this alliance enabled the IIP to distance itself from its Islamist, exile reputation and provided the party a greater degree of local support. The success of Sunni fighters against AQI and their contribution to the improved security situation in the province demonstrated the ability of the IIP/Diyala Reform Party to address the concerns of the local Sunni population of Diyala, yielding the coalition the largest bloc of votes in Diyala.

In addition to voting for secular-leaning, nationalist parties, the Iraqis voted against incumbent parties in the 2009 provincial elections. This movement against incumbents is best demonstrated in Basra and Karbala provinces. In the 2005 elections, the Islamic Supreme Council for Iraq (ISCI), which is openly supported by Iran and has strong ties to Shia militias, won the largest bloc of votes in Basra Province. However, ISCI's ineffective governance and the deterioration of security, due in large part to Shia militia operations, diminished its political appeal to the population of Basra. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki took advantage of ISCI's failure as an opportunity to gain a constituency in the province, directing a successful ISF/Coalition operation in Basra that defeated Shia militias and improved security. Simultaneously, Maliki developed a tribal outreach program that provided a political voice to the population of Basra. The choice appears to have been easy for the Basra voters when they went to the polls in January 2009. Maliki's State of Law party won 37% of the vote, while ISCI won only 11.6%. Prior to the 2009 election, there was growing concern about an ISCI driven movement in Basra for a separate Shia federalist state in southern Iraq. The election results demonstrate the Basra population's rejection of the federalist movement by ISCI and the population's widespread perception of ISCI's inability to provide security and services.

The desire of Iraq's citizens to remove incumbents has outstripped even the most powerful political movements in the country. Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law Party won the majority of votes in nine out of the fourteen provinces that held elections this January. Clearly, the secular and nationalist platform of Maliki's reinvented platform has demonstrated its appeal to the citizens of Iraq. However,

despite the strength of his movement, the desire among Iraqis to unseat incumbents was even stronger. In the one province where Maliki's party was incumbent, his hometown no-less, Maliki was defeated by Yousef Majid al Habboubi, a Shia moderate and the former mayor of Karbala. Habboubi's credentials as a moderate secular leader and effective mayor, combined with dissatisfaction among voters with the parties in power resulted in Maliki's defeat.

Finally, the 2009 elections results are a significant milestone in the progress of Sunni reintegration and reconciliation with the Shia population and the Government of Iraq. In the 2005 provincial elections, less than 2% of the Sunni population voted. While it is too early to know what percentage of each religious sect voted in Iraq, in al Anbar, an overwhelmingly Sunni province, roughly 40% of the population voted in 2009 compared to the 2% turnout in 2005. The increased Sunni participation in al-Anbar in 2009 resulted in the election of a wide range of political parties: the National Project List, a Sunni secular party won 17.6%; Abu Risha's Awakening of Iraq and Independents, a Sunni tribal party won 17.1%; and the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Sunni Islamist Party won 15.9%. This variety of political representation promises healthy competition for political constituencies compared to the non-functional and sectarian IIP who won the majority of Sunni seats in the provincial elections of 2005.

The results from the provincial elections illustrate the Iraqi population's shift from the sectarian parties elected in 2005 to secular parties. The returns also demonstrate the Iraqi's desire for a state ruled by a strong central government. Despite the success of the provincial elections many political obstacles lie ahead. District elections within the provinces, the seating of the newly elected provincial councils and the councils' elections of new governors will likely heighten sectarian and political tensions. National elections are scheduled for December of 2009. Until then, the majority of seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives rest with parties that were disfavored in these elections. The success of the provincial elections represents the first step on a long road to political stability in Iraq.

ⁱ Frederick Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, *Iraq's Remarkable Election*. The Wall Street Journal, February 5, 2009.