

Post-election Analysis

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IRAQ

Provincial Elections 2023: A Decade in the Making

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Introduction¹

On the 18th of December 2023, Iraq held its fourth provincial elections after the US-led invasion in 2003. [Almost 6,000](#) candidates competed for 285² provincial council seats in all of Iraq's provinces with the exception of the three provinces of the Kurdistan Region: Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. The [last Iraqi provincial elections](#) were held a decade earlier in 2013. This article aims at examining the election results and their impact on power dynamics between internal political actors in Iraq. It attempts to shed light on the significance, key features, and outcomes of the elections. In order to achieve these aims, the remainder of the article delves into the significance of the elections, their results, and implications.

Significance of the Elections

Due to the war on ISIS which lasted until 2017, political instability, and protest movements such as the Tishreen protest movement, provincial elections were [delayed](#) and postponed from year to another. Thus, the long anticipation of the election underlines its significance. Furthermore, the significance of the elections is also observable through the participation of Kirkuk. The province in northern Iraq had [only participated in one election](#) prior to 2023, the first provincial elections in 2005.

Another significant highlight to the background of the elections can be underlined by the aftermath and outcomes of the 2021 parliamentary elections. [The government formation process](#) which ensued following the 2021 parliamentary elections led to multiple shifts. The two most impactful of said shifts were the formation of a Coordination Framework³-dominated government and the departure of the Sadrist movement from political life. This meant that, for the first time, the Shi'a share of power has been controlled by one -semi-cohesive- political actor and that the provincial elections were boycotted by one of the most important political actors in post-2003 Iraq, the Sadrists.

Key Features of the Election Results

As a result of the 2023 [amendment to the electoral law](#) which reversed the 2020 electoral law, the elections were held using the list-based/ Modified Sainte- Laguë method. The previous law had changed the voting process, exchanging the list vote with the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV). The method used in counting votes also shifted, moving from the modified Sainte- Laguë method to the First Past-the-Post method. In addition, the previous law also changed the division of constituencies. Instead of counting each province as an individual 'large' electoral district, the previous law divided Iraq into 83 'medium-sized' electorates. This gave smaller and emerging

¹ 1 All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

² It should be noted that, in accordance with [article 9 of the 2023 electoral law](#), although the total number of contested provincial council seats is 285, 10 of them are reserved quotas for ethnic minorities as follows: 3 in Baghdad, 1 for Christians, 1 for Feyli Kurds, and 1 for Sabian-Mandaeans; 3 in Mosul, 1 for Christians, 1 for Yazidis, and 1 for Shabaks; 1 for Christians in Basra; 1 for Feyli Kurds in Wasit; 1 for Sabian-Mandaeans in Maysan; and 1 for Christians in Kirkuk.

³ The Coordination Framework (CF) is an alliance of Shia, Iran-affiliated parties and coalitions which opposed the Sadrists, suffered losses in the 2021 parliamentary elections, and currently holds a majority in the Council of Representatives and forms the backbone to the government of Al-Sudani.

parties the opportunity to compete with larger more experienced and well-funded parties. The 2023 amendment, however, reversed all of these changes and returned to the former division of 18 electoral districts and the list-based/ Modified Sainte- Laguë method with an initial divisor of 1.7 which further complicates smaller parties' opportunities to win in the elections. Due to being supported by larger ruling class parties and their unpopularity, these shifts could explain the deterioration of [overall turnout rate](#) to the elections. Out of more than 16 million eligible voters, only 6.6 million turned out to participate in the election, bringing the turnout rate down to approximately 41%.

Iraq Provincial Election Results, 2023

List Name	Seats Won	Background/Affiliation
We Build	43	Shi'a Arab/CF
State of Law	35	Shi'a Arab/CF
Alliance of National State Forces	24	Shi'a Arab/CF
National Progress Alliance (Taqaddum)	21	Sunni Arab
Sovereignty Alliance	13	Sunni Arab
Tasmim Alliance	12	Shi'a Arab/Basrah-based
Iraq Steadfastness Alliance (Azem)	9	Sunni Arab
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	6	Kurdish Nationalist
Other Lists	122	-
Total	285	-

Source: The Independent High Electoral Committee. Edited by the Author.

The results of the elections highlight the impact of the Sadrist withdrawal from political life on inter-Shi'a dynamics. With the Sadrists out of the picture, the CF were able to mostly dominate the central and southern provinces of Iraq. The lists which make up the CF were able to win a total of 102 seats. The three lists of We build - which gathers political wings of members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF); the State of Law coalition -led by former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki; and the Alliance of National State Forces -led by cleric Ammar Al-Hakim and former Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi, won 43, 35, and 24 seats, respectively. Due to the absence of a large political entity such as the Sadrists, with the ability to compete with the CF on the national level, the members of the CF were successful in coming in first place in seven provinces.

While the elections did show a rise in the influence of the CF exemplified by their gains, it also showcased the influence wielded by governors. Lists headed or controlled by the governors or someone from the governors' parties and coalitions were able to win [first place in a total of seven provinces](#). Lists led by the governors of Al-Basrah, Karbala', Wasit, and Diyala won first place in their provinces, respectively. While in Salahuddeen, Al-Anbar, and Mosul, lists associated with the governors of these provinces -rather than directly controlled by- won the most votes. These electoral wins have been translated into executive gains in multiple occasions. As of writing this article (February 2024) six of these parties and coalitions associated with governors have been able to secure the position of the new governor from within their ranks. Governors who are members of or are associated with winning lists got reelected in [Al-Basrah](#), [Wasit](#), [Karbala'](#) and [Mosul](#). While in [Salahuddeen](#) and [Al-Anbar](#), a new governor from the winning party or coalition was elected.

Election Results in Kirkuk Province, 2023

List Name	Seats Won	Background/Affiliation
Kirkuk is Our Strength	5	Kurdish
The Arab Alliance in Kirkuk	3	Arab
The Unified Turkmen Front of Iraq	2	Turkmen
The Leadership	2	Arab
The KDP	2	Kurdish
Arabism Alliance	1	Arab
Babylonian Movement	1	Christian/PMF

Source: The Independent High Electoral Committee. Edited by the Author.

Although it has been ten years since the last provincial elections were held, [for Kirkuk, it has been 18 years](#). Due to differences between the Federal Government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, provincial elections were not held in Kirkuk in 2009 and 2013. In September, two months prior to the elections, [tensions escalated](#) between the province's ethnic communities. Arabs and Turkmen protested against the KDP returning to the province. Clashes between the Arab and Turkmen protests and Kurdish counter protests, coupled with intervention by security forces led to four Kurdish protestors killed. Therefore, 18 years of anticipation, in conjunction with recent ethnic tensions led to Kirkuk having the highest [turnout rate of 65%](#) and a highly [polarized election results](#). Almost all the lists which won seats in Kirkuk only ran in the province, highlighting the particular characteristics of the province.

Conclusion

After a decade, provincial elections were finally held. However, they were held in circumstances far from ideal. The elections have not been successful in luring the Sadrists back into political dynamics. The impact of the Sadrist boycott might be best observed through the low turnout rate of 41%. This also underlines the diminishing trust everyday Iraqis have in the ruling political class and the post-2003 political order all together. On the other hand, the elections did provide political forces, primarily the CF, with the opportunity to expand their influence and to cement their power as the major Shi'a political actor. Furthermore, the elections showcased a rising trend of governors building local networks and capitalizing on them to outmaneuver larger parties which run on a national level.

Provincial councils can play a major role in developing provinces and uplifting local communities. However, a fragmented provincial council can also prove to be another bureaucratic obstacle in the way of development as the council turns into a stage where political actors face one another. The provincial elections helped shed light on the increasing level of polarization in multiethnic provinces such as Kirkuk. Even though a number of provinces have already held their inaugural sessions and elected heads for their councils and governors, [Kirkuk](#) has been unable to do so. As a result of disagreements regarding the ethnic background of the governor, the newly elected members to the provincial council have not been successful in electing a local government. Arab and Turkmen representatives have decided to boycott the inaugural session which meant that the session could not be held. Given the fact that a violent confrontation between the diverse communities of the province has already taken

place in September, if the Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen blocs do not reach an agreement, this 'tug of war' could become a serious threat to the security and stability of the province and consequently, all of Iraq.

About the author

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