

# Teim



## TEIM Election Watch Analysis

### PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

### IRAQ/ Sectarianism and the 2010 legislative elections

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The upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq, expected to be held on March 7th 2010, will take place following extensive and detailed debates and a difficult passage through parliament of the country's new Electoral Act.

The fact that Iraq's politicians have managed to reach a consensus over these elections is truly a positive gesture and one worthy of all types of praise and support by the international community, given the peculiar political situation the country is undergoing. But the fact remains that circumstances in the country overall, are far from suitable for elections to be held. Elections, as we know, are not merely a technical process, but rather an exercise in democracy and the peaceful transmission of power between different political options. Elections are also the recognition of one's opponents, respect for human rights, the independence of the judiciary and respect for minorities. All of which must be firmly placed beneath the auspices of a modern electoral law that allows freedom of expression, precludes governmental interference in trade union activities and guarantees civil society's control over elections, while at the same time, preventing parties and sectarian groups defended by violent militias from participating in the elections.

The elections held in Iraq since the fall of the Baath regime on April 9th 2003, have really been a kind of referendum, the results of which have been known in advance, accompanied by pro-democracy propaganda which largely ignores the country's silent majority, and whose goal has been the disclosure of a series of agreements and long-range strategic decisions, that have largely mortgaged the future of Iraq. The rivalry between different political forces has gone on beneath the shadow of a vague and very porous election law which allows illegal or semi-illegal manoeuvring and where influence, sectarianism and militias have been the most relevant actors in the entire process. Tribal and religious power centres have usurped the leadership of civil organisations, trade unions and professionals. Donations to religious or ethnic groups and government jobs reserved for certain political forces have emptied the elections held to date of their meaning. In exchange, frustration, anger and widespread discontent have been the fate of large sectors of the population, dominated by disappointment and despair after each election. Nearly inexistent basic services, an extremely high unemployment rate, a total lack of security and increased levels of poverty are the daily bread of Iraqi citizens.

The practice of power has shown that most of the political forces currently in the Iraqi government do not believe in democracy or share its values. Democracy runs counter to their interests as they aim to create simple, easily manipulated citizens, exploited with empty slogans, and swayed by freshly conjured up sectarian and ethnic sentiments which inspire hatred towards rivals or indeed, anybody different. Superstition dominates public life, as does a retarded mentality that encourages atypical beliefs, with almost every day of the year devoted to religious celebrations of the births and deaths of historic figures and holy men.

The new electoral law adopted on November 9th 2009 by the Iraqi Parliament, thanks to the 141 votes in favour out of total 196 votes cast, is a series of amendments to Law 16/2005. Changes include:

- The total number of seats in parliament will be 325 instead of 275.
- There will be one seat for every 100,000 voters.
- A fixed quota of seats is reserved for certain minorities: 5 seats for Christians and one seat each for the Shabaks, Sabeen Mandaean and Yezidis.
- Each province is considered a single electoral district.
- Candidates run together on open lists, with a minimum of three candidates per list. Each party list must comprise at least one woman among every three nominees. Voters may select a party list or an individual candidate on a list, and independent candidates are allowed.

- Vacant seats are awarded to the winning lists in proportion to the number of votes obtained.

- Elections will take place in Kirkuk and in other provinces where the electoral roll is in doubt, at the same time as the other Iraqi provinces. Doubt has been cast on those provinces that have experienced an annual population growth rate of 5% or more. To review discrepancies in the electoral rolls and compare these with official statistics, the Iraqi parliament has created committees made up of representatives from the Planning, Interior, and Commerce ministries and the Independent High Commission for Elections, which will also receive the assistance of the UN. The work of these committees is to be concluded within one year.

The amended electoral bill was ultimately vetoed by Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who alleged that the votes of the displaced and refugees outside the country were not referred to therein. It is a well-known fact that al-Hashimi represents the Sunnis that form part of the current Iraqi government, and as the majority of refugees abroad are members of this branch of Islam, al-Hashimi's move is surely a political calculation designed to win the votes of the Diaspora for his political movement.

The Kurds have behaved in a similar fashion with their demands, especially their claims over the city of Kirkuk which they aim to convert into the capital of Kurdistan at any price, despite population censuses and statistics that place them numerically inferior to the Turkmen and Arabs. Their attempts to change the demographic character of the city, expelling Arabs and repopulating their homes with Kurdish families arriving from other provinces in the north, are well known by all.

It is patently clear that political life in this country is dominated by sectarianism and not general interest or collective participation. Electoral corruption is just another fact of the widespread corruption that has become a phenomenon and a way of life in Iraq today, where forgery and usurpation of citizens' rights is common practice on the part of the authorities who play with the lives of defenceless Iraqis.

Electoral corruption can be observed in the threats from the militias of the various political parties, particularly the religious-based parties, who do not hesitate to kill or kidnap their rivals. The militias are illegally financed by neighbouring countries on sectarian grounds, and their purpose is to cause as much terror as possible among the ranks of their opponents, to exert influence on the authorities, ministries and various government institutions as well as to manipulate the different news media in their favour.

All of this takes place against a particularly rarefied and exceptional backdrop of circumstances, given the lack of security and the absence of a law concerning political parties, not to mention the widespread disorder affecting electoral campaigns, in which the strong round up the weak, and those closest to power marginalise the opposition. Serious political manifestos are in short supply, while ghost candidates abound and mosques and other religious shrines are used as electoral advertising space. The methods used by some parties are at the same time, striking and curious: lately it has become common practice to distribute blankets, phones and cash to ensure votes.

In short, with these elections just like those before them, instead of citizen participation coming to the fore, attempts to politicize religion, to awaken hateful sectarian and ethnic sentiments, and to exploit the needs of citizens and their misfortunes in order to gain political advantage, have all reared their ugly heads. Doubtlessly, if things continue as before, and if the next election does not mark a turning point, demonstrating that Iraqi politicians have learned their lesson, Iraq will continue to be mired in the most absolute disaster for the next few years or even decades.