Coalitions Reject Election Results

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BAGHDAD – Many Iraqis are demanding a new poll after more than 1,500 cases of election fraud and forgery were reported in the Dec. 15 elections, at least 30 of them "extremely serious."

The results so far indicate a strong win for Shi'ite religious groups. There are widespread complaints that many of the instances of fraud favored Shi'ite religious groups that led the interim government which conducted the poll.

In Baghdad, the most important district in the poll with more than a fifth of the seats in parliament, the Iranian-backed Shi'ite alliance took a surprising 57 percent of the vote, as opposed to 19 percent for the Sunni coalition.

With final election results expected next week, the number of cases of fraud constituting the largest fraud in a new democracy to date led to at least 42 Sunni and secular Shi'ite political parties demanding a review of complaints by an independent international body.

Many complaints relate to false ballot box stuffing and intimidation of voters.

After the United Nations rejected a review, the coalition of Sunni and secular Shi'ite parties, al-Maram, issued a joint statement threatening to boycott the new legislature. Large demonstrations are continuing across Iraq.

Tens of thousands of worshippers who support al-Maram gathered at a Sunni mosque in Baghdad Tuesday this week. The Imam called for a protest demonstration after busloads of people from across the capital city arrived to attend his sermon.

"Please God remove the invaders from Iraq with the hands of the mujahideen," he said. "And honorable prayers, we call for you to deny the elections, which were a fraud."

He appealed against any domination of Iraq that would separate Sunnis from Shi'ites. "Iraqis don't support separation of their citizens," the Imam said. "My tribe (al-Jabouri) is both Sunni and Shi'ite. We are all cousins and are not separated by these elections."

Concern is rising among these groups over Iranian domination. "We ask almighty God to save us from being under the control of the Iranians," 45-year-old Baghdad resident Nadham al-Doury told IPS. Al-Douri who joined thousands of others in a march after the sermon said the election results would be forged, and that the current leaders of Iraq were "fascists."

Some banners at the rally read, "Yes to Real Nomination...No to False Nomination" and "We

are Calling for Re-Elections." Demonstrators in the mile-long procession chanted slogans like "Baghdad Will Be Free...Iran Should Stay Out" and "They are Playing with a Flame Which Must Burn Them."

With the main Shi'ite coalition rejecting calls for another poll, tensions across Iraq are rising.

Many parties are asking for the Independent Higher Commission for Elections in Iraq (IHCEI) to be replaced with a new commission whose members have no ties with the parties in power. Some Sunni and secular Shi'ite political parties have renamed the IHCEI the 'Independent Higher Commission for the Islamic Revolution' that is biased towards the dominant Shi'ite party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Demonstrations began Dec. 22, a week after the elections. Countless mosques across Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq called for demonstrations against widespread fraud. Tens of thousands came out to protest in the days following.

"I have won my seat in the parliament, but we don't accept it," Salaeh Al-Mutlak, head of the secular National Dialogue Front told IPS. "The elections should be canceled because they were not legitimate."

Sheikh Mahmoud al-Sumaidaei, spokesman for the influential Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars, told followers, "You have to be ready during these hard times, and combat forgeries and lies for the sake of Islam." The elections, he said, were "a conspiracy built on lies and forgery."

Arabs are disputing the results also in Kirkuk in Kurdistan to the north. They say Kurdish parties brought in voters from other areas to vote for them.

The United States and Britain, who wanted the election to install a secular, pro-Western democracy in Iraq, are now left with what looks more and more like a pro-Iranian, anti-Western Islamic state.

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