

Iraq Election Sets Stage for Protracted Civil Strife

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Iraqis went to the polls on Wednesday to elect a new parliament and government under conditions of a virtual civil war, terrorist bombings and sectarian tensions stoked by all the political factions and their external backers, who are fighting for control over Iraq's vast energy resources.

Iraq has the fifth largest oil reserves in the world and is the second largest producer among the OPEC nations, having just passed Iran and trailing only Saudi Arabia.

The government deployed troops and security forces, with Peshmerga forces patrolling the Kurdish autonomous zone in the north of the country, and enforced a curfew and ban on traffic in the capital Baghdad, in an effort to prevent car bombs and suicide attacks from deterring voters from going to the polling stations.

In the run up to the elections, there have been at least 40 attacks, with bombs targeting electoral rallies in Baghdad, Khanaqin and Diyala. On April 28, the day when Iraq's security forces voted, seven polling stations were attacked in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Anbar province, Salahuddin province, and Mosul, with a loss of more than 50 lives. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), an al-Qaeda affiliate, has claimed responsibility for many of the attacks.

Only 70 percent of polling stations in insecure areas of Anbar Province, parts of which are controlled by Sunni Islamist, tribal and al-Qaeda militias, were open, while other polling stations in the insecure areas of Baghdad, Mosul and Diyala were closed.

This is the first general election since the US and its allies withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011 after failing to secure a guarantee of legal immunity for the remaining US troops. The Iraqi people were left to deal with the bitter legacy of a criminal war to topple the Saddam Hussein regime and a nearly nine-year military occupation that destroyed Iraq's basic infrastructure.

The result is soaring unrest over unemployment, poverty, lack of basic services such as electricity, clean water and freedom from flooding, corruption, and a rising tide of violence that has claimed more than 2,000 lives in the first three months of this year, and 750 lives in April alone.

Far from anticipating any improvement in their conditions, both voters and commentators believe that the elections are unlikely to resolve the severe political and social crisis that is the legacy of 35 years of war and imperialist intervention. On the contrary, there is open speculation that these elections might be the last under a nominally unified state.

Iraq's complicated proportional representation system means that the official results are not expected till mid-May. With more than 9,000 candidates from numerous electoral alliances on the ballot for 328 parliamentary seats, no one party is expected to win an outright majority. While Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki continues to dominate his Shi'ite-based State of Law coalition, the remaining Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish parties and alliances have splintered and formed new alliances and blocs.

There have been numerous allegations of foul play in the electoral process. According to Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister and leader of the Iraqiya List, which won the most seats in parliament in 2010, 38 candidates from his political bloc were barred from running in the elections. The Electoral Commission claimed that it had disqualified 34 candidates from all parties.

All the political factions and cliques have played the sectarian card. Not one of them has addressed the dreadful economic and social conditions facing the vast majority of the population, even as oil production and revenues increase. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the draft Iraqi budget for 2014 "anticipates average exports of 3.4m barrels/day (b/d), up 1m b/d from the previous year."

The mounting poverty is the direct result of al-Maliki's government, installed under the US occupation, which has promoted free market policies and introduced legislation outlawing the organisation of workers and unions to fight for higher wages and better conditions.

While al-Maliki's bloc is expected to win the highest number of votes, he will need to form some kind of coalition to gain an overall majority in parliament and a third term in office. This will entail a process of political horse-trading that could take months. But even this is not assured, as the bloc which won the highest vote total in the 2010 elections, Allawi's Iraqiya List, was unable to form a government, giving way after seven months to a coalition led by al-Maliki.

Al-Maliki has played the role of the strongman, claiming that he is the only one capable of uniting Iraq. The very opposite is the case. Taking his lead from the US occupation, his government has stoked the sectarian tensions between the majority Shi'ites and minority Sunnis, who live predominantly in the west of the country, to rally Shi'ite support in advance of the elections. He has purged leading Sunni politicians, cracked down on the population, branding all protests the work of al-Qaeda, and accused Saudi Arabia of funding the militias.

Following the arrest of a prominent Sunni politician, the killing of his brother and five bodyguards, and the breakup of a year-long protest camp, civil war has been raging in Anbar Province for four months between government forces and tribal, local and Sunni Islamist militias who oppose both the government and each other.

According to the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), this new "Iraqi insurgency" comprises at least 12 major organizations and possibly up to 40 distinct groups. It estimates that less than 10 percent are non-Iraqi foreign insurgents, a fact that both Baghdad and Washington downplay.

But as a result of the fighting, more than 400,000 Iraqis have been forced to flee their homes, while the Anbar capital, Ramadi, remains contested and Fallujah is under the control of insurgents.

The supposed threat from al-Qaeda, however, is very much the product of Washington and its regional allies' sponsorship of Sunni Islamist militias in neighboring Syria, including ISIS and al-Nusra, to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, as part of its wider project of isolating Iran and curtailing the influence of Russia and China in the Middle East.

The Obama administration, with supreme cynicism, is using the threat of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Iraq as a pretext to arm the al-Maliki government and thus control Iraq and its resources. At the same time, it is boosting its teams of specialists working under contract to the Iraqi government to provide security, military training, and intelligence analysis, as well as commercial, energy and construction projects. While Secretary of State John Kerry ruled out putting "American boots" on the ground, he has delegated the task to the Pentagon's sub-contractors, which, according to figures cited by the *Wall Street Journal*, numbered more than 12,500 in January 2013.

Tensions have also risen between the al-Maliki regime and the Kurdistan Regional Government, which has sought to export oil directly, cutting Baghdad out of any share of the proceeds, prompting fears of outright secession. Such is the bitter factional rivalry that conflicts over borders and rights to oil and gas wealth threaten to break out into civil war there too.

Al-Maliki has consolidated power into his own hands, holding four positions simultaneously—prime minister, defence minister, interior minister and head of national security—putting 930,000 security personnel at his disposal. This was ostensibly because he could not get parliamentary approval for appointees to those cabinet positions. He also has the judiciary under his thumb. As a result, he was able to use the courts to overturn a law introduced by parliament that would have prevented him from running for a third term.

Eleven years after the US invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has a tyrannical government with the third highest execution rate in the world. Human Rights Watch in its 2013 Report *Iraq: a Broken Justice System*, described the al-Maliki government as using "draconian measures against opposition politicians, detainees, demonstrators and journalists, effectively squeezing the space for independent civil society and political freedoms ... the Iraqi people today face a government that is slipping further into authoritarianism and doing little to make them safer."

Weeks before the elections, the cabinet endorsed a "National Safety" bill, which defines a "state of emergency" and gives near-absolute powers to the Prime Minister to determine what constitutes an emergency, prompting widespread fears that the government could use the law to eliminate its opponents.

The conflicts instigated in Iraq by Washington, Britain, France and their regional allies are creating the conditions for the break-up of the country and a far wider conflagration that will embroil not just Iraq, but Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf petro-states.

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