

## **After the Sunni Boycott**

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Sunni groups may have achieved their aim of opting out of elections, but now they must decide whether it makes sense to boycott a constitutional process that will shape their future.

After the Sunni Arabs in Iraq's western Anbar governorate stayed away from last month's election, many are now considering how best to secure their interests in a changed political landscape. For some, participation in an administration that they see as the product of flawed elections is out of the question, while others want a role in governance nevertheless.

Iraq's major Sunni political groups boycotted the January 30 election, after the influential Muslim Scholars' Association said a fair poll was impossible because of the continuing violence in Sunni-majority areas.

Election results indicate that voter turnout in these areas proved much lower than in the rest of the country, both as a result of the boycott, and because many people were scared by the security situation or by the possible repercussions of voting.

In Anbar, the mainly Sunni province where the volatile cities of Fallujah and Ramadi are located, turnout is estimated at just two per cent.

The transitional National Assembly, which will be the first Iraqi legislature not to be dominated by Sunnis, will find it hard to function – and harder still to win universal legitimacy – if one-fifth of the population perceives itself to be disenfranchised.

The assembly's principal task is to draft a constitution by August this year, in time for a referendum in October and fresh parliamentary election in December. The final document will define how Iraq is governed and how much autonomy its regions will enjoy – issues in which Sunnis as well as Shias and Kurds have a vital interest.

The Shia and Kurdish coalitions which did well in the ballot have insisted that they want to bring Sunni Arabs on board by giving them a role in decision-making if not in elected institutions. There has been some talk of the post of speaker of parliament being awarded to a Sunni.

The question now is whether the political forces that represent the Sunnis are prepared to take up the offer.

The largest Sunni party, the Iraqi Islamic Party, has branded the elections illegitimate and refused to participate in the transitional administration that emerged from them.

At the same time, the party has recently been in negotiations with the veteran Sunni politician Adnan Pachachi, who wants Sunni groups to take part in shaping the new constitution.

Others in the Sunni areas – while maintaining their reservations about the electoral process itself – want to move on and are reviewing their options.

Iraqi Islamic Party member Said al-Ani voiced cautious optimism, suggesting that the National Assembly might be acceptable as long as it puts national rather than sectarian interest first.

“I think if the elected parliament finishes with sectarianism and succeeds in translating into reality the interests of those parties which took part in the boycott, it will be a good thing for the unity of Iraq,” he said.

For some of those interviewed by IWPR in Anbar province, it is important for the new Iraqi administration to look strong - and that means overcoming ethnic and religious divisions quickly. They argue that a divided government will send the wrong message to powerful neighbours like Iran and Turkey.

Raed al-Dlemy was among those not opposed to the vote - he was an election official in Ramadi, a hundred kilometres west of Baghdad, only resigning after he received several threats. Now he thinks that despite the low turnout figures, the Sunnis still have a chance to make their voices heard.

“The loss of Sunni votes at this stage can be compensated for when the constitution is being written, as the Sunnis will then be able to participate so as to protect their rights,” he said.

Muhammed al-Ubaidi, a lawyer from the town of Hit, 50 km up the Euphrates river from Ramadi, thinks it was a bad tactical move to stay away from the polling booths, saying, “It would have been better for the Sunnis to participate in the election, so as to balance the powers of the Kurds and Shias, who have now become dominant.”

But many others are unrepentant about the boycott, and are determined not to work with an administration which they see as having been installed under the shadow of a foreign military presence.

“The boycott of the national and governorate council elections by most Sunnis was the only way, and the best way, to reject these ballots,” said Walid al-Omari, a government employee from Anah, a town in Anbar province less than 100 km from the Syrian border. “The end product is a government that is not legitimate.”

Boycott supporters insist that all of Iraq’s governorates must enjoy security and stability before a fair election can be held.

“In this critical period, an election is pointless, and our demand to postpone it was a good one,” said Ayad Fayadh, a government employee in Ramadi. “We don’t regret our boycott.”

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**Location:** [Africa](#)

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