

Baghdad Buses Abuzz With Election Chatter

Author: [Muhammad al-Zaidi](#)

As elections approach, passengers engage in sometimes heated political debate. Political chatter is rife in Baghdad ahead of the country's provincial council elections, with citizens taking their debates into decidedly public spaces.

Baghdad's public buses have become a new platform for would-be analysts and pundits who feel no qualms about striking up discussions with strangers on the upcoming polls.

Annoying to some passengers, enlightening to others, the political talk reflects a surprising interest in the January 31 elections which will be held in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces.

Voters said they felt deflated and apathetic last year as Iraq's leaders squabbled over when and where the polls should be held. Potential voters were not registering, and few campaigns were in full swing.

But as election day draws near and campaigning ramps up, politics appears to be uppermost in people's minds. Baghdad's buses, used by everyone from civil servants to the unemployed poor, have become a type of public forum.

"Debates on buses are unavoidable," said Ahmad Mansour, a 25-year-old university student.

"Once you get on the bus, you can hear passengers talking about this or that issue," he said. "Some of the calmer dialogue is useful as it tackles a specific point. Other discussions are useless as they turn into boring, heated debates."

He said conversations on security or even sport ultimately veer toward the elections.

Some of the most heated debates take place between opinionated voters or party loyalists. Though fiery, these arguments do not turn violent.

Amir Hamid who drives a minibus, said drivers often have to remind passengers to pay their fare because they are so caught up in the debates.

In a sense, they reflect emerging freedoms and improving security in Iraq. Until recently, fear of militias meant many shied away from public discussions.

But while Baghdad voters appear less apathetic than they were a few months ago, their interest in politics does not necessarily reflect optimism about leaders or government. Many are disappointed in the current provincial councils and politics in general.

Bus passengers debate party politics and issues such as whether technocrats are the best candidates. They bemoan the lack of services and discuss the dominant role of tribes in politics.

Some even wonder whether the electorate should bother voting in the provincial councils.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential Shia leader in Iraq, issued a statement last week urging Iraqis to vote even if they were disillusioned with their leaders. Sistani has refused to endorse any candidates in this election.

Women follow the public discussions but do not often participate. However, they have been known to act as mediators when debates become heated.

According to Abu Luay, a 63-year-old pensioner, their intervention can prompt the men to fall silent out of respect – at least until the topic is changed and a new debate begins.

"Women talk very little on buses," said 50-year-old Um Hussein, a housewife. "They keep listening to both sides and they intervene at critical moments to calm [men] down."

"The most interesting debates take place where some common ground is found and participants' respect each other's right to differ."

Jamil Muhsin, a Baghdad psychology professor, expressed some concern about angry political debates but said the discussions reflected a "patriotic sense".

"What is nice about this is that passengers have the freedom to express their opinions freely," he said. "But some of them do not know the right way to express their ideas. The fanatical ones will try to impose their views, regardless of whether they're right or wrong."

Muhammad al-Zaidi is an IWPR trainee based in Baghdad.

Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

Topic: Iraqi Provincial Elections, February 2009

Focus: Iraq

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/baghdad-buses-abuzz-election-chatter>