

## **Ballot Shapes New Political Landscape**

**Author:** [Laura Ingalls](#)

Following an election in which turnout seems to have been unexpectedly high, people's minds are already turning to the new National Assembly.

After an election that appears to have been more of a success than many dared hope, analysts in Iraq are trying to figure out how the winners will shape a new political landscape.

Turnout was high overall, with the Iraqi Independent Electoral Commission estimating that up to eight million people cast ballots, around 60 per cent of eligible voters. Carlos Valenzuela, the United Nation's top election official in Iraq, said that exact turnout figures would not be known for several weeks.

Kurds in the north and Shia in the south voted in large numbers. In the mainly Sunni Muslim areas in central Iraq, turnout was lower, but even there it appeared to be higher than expected.

Najm al-Rubai, a spokesman for the Iraq Election Information Network, said preliminary field reports indicated that there had been some small procedural violations, but "they were not so big as to make the elections illegal".

Now the political deal-making begins.

None of the big coalitions is expected to win an outright majority of the 275 seats in the transitional National Assembly. That body is charged with writing a new constitution and choosing a president and two vice presidents, who will in turn select a prime minister.

The new assembly members are going to have to make compromises if they are to tackle the myriad of challenges that lie ahead.

The first problem for the newly-elected assembly will be how to bring Sunni Muslims into the business of government. Veteran politician Adnan Pachachi, himself a Sunni, said he wanted the Sunni parties that had boycotted the election to take part in writing the constitution.

"If that can be done, I think we will have paved the way for a much more inclusive election before the end of the year," said Pachachi.

Analysts have warned that a failure to bring Sunnis on board could result in civil war. But the parties took part in the election are unlikely to want to give up assembly seats to Sunni politicians, or to view their inclusion at this late stage as fair.

Another problem could be the desire of some Shia political groups to impose a religious agenda in Iraq. Analysts have suggested that the country's supreme Shia leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, supported the Shia-led United Iraqi Alliance as a way of gaining a say in the drafting of the country's new constitution.

Sistani is said to support the idea of making Islam the official religion of Iraq, as it is in almost all Arab

countries.

Analysts also believe that some Shia figures will seek to introduce Islamic law into the country's civil code. Last year, religious members of the United States-appointed Iraqi Governing Council attempted to change Iraq's personal status laws, which govern issues such as women's rights in divorce and inheritance. The plans were shelved after a public outcry from women's activists in Iraq and abroad, but are likely to resurface if religious-minded politicians play a major role in the new interim legislature.

In the run-up to the election, the United Iraqi Alliance had attempted to dispel fears about these issues. Mouwafak al-Rubaie, a leading candidate with the United Iraqi Alliance, said his party would not seek to establish a religious state and would work to build a "democratic, federal and pluralistic system".

There may also be an ethnic divide in the new Assembly. It is likely that the Kurds will push to get their autonomous status written into the constitution. The Kurdish region - comprising three northern governorates - became self-governing after it fell out of Saddam Hussein's grasp in 1991.

The two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, formed a joint list at national level to so as maximise the Kurdish vote.

So far, the PUK and KDP have managed to largely muzzle the voices calling for complete secession from the rest of Iraq. However, there were tents outside Kurdish-region polling sites on election day where activists conducted an unofficial vote on independence.

Sistani has already voiced opposition to giving the Kurds a veto over the constitution, which they currently have as part of the Transitional Administrative Law, the interim constitution. A Kurdish drive for greater autonomy could cause deep divisions in the interim assembly.

What is clear at this stage is that those parties which win seats in the National Assembly will have to work through their differences fairly rapidly if they are to meet the August deadline for drafting the new constitution. Voters are scheduled to vote on the new constitution in October, and then return to the polls in December to elect a new parliament.

Laura Ingalls is an IWPR editor/trainer in Sulaimaniyah. IWPR's reporting network across Iraq contributed to this article.

**Location:** [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)  
[Iraq](#)

**Focus:** [Iraq](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/ballot-shapes-new-political-landscape>