

Celebration Marks Voting in Shia South

Author: [Meethaq Fadhil](#)

Shia queue up to make their voices heard in city of Nassriyah.

People in Iraq's mainly Shia south came to polling stations in a spirit of celebration to cast their ballots in Iraq's first multi-party elections for half a century.

"Today is the nicest day of my life," said Hadi al-Huseinawi, as he rushed to get to a polling station in the southern city of Nassriyah. "What matters is the elections - it doesn't matter who wins."

Qayser Muhammed, 15, stood on the main road in Nassriyah distributing water to voters who passed by, saying, "This is my way of being part of the elections, since I cannot actually take part given my age."

Voters started queuing early outside polling stations in the south, home to Iraq's majority Shia community. With 60 per cent of the population, the Shia see the vote as a chance to overturn years of oppression and win a leading role in government.

Voting was largely peaceful in the south, despite four mortar attacks in Basra, Iraq's second largest city. No one was killed. Two of the attacks hit their intended targets - polling centres in the southern part of the city.

Abu Abeer, a 47-year-old school headmaster, said he initially held off voting for fear that polling sites in Nassriyah might become insurgent targets, "Early on, I was afraid to go along because of [possible] actions by armed men, but it became clear that I was wrong."

In Diwaniyah, in the Qadisiyah province to the northwest of Nassriyah, armoured vehicles and police patrolled the streets. The Iraqi military and police also used their vehicles to ferry people to polling sites.

Some voters in Diwaniyah reported polling violations. Zaid Salman, a health department employee, said an election monitor approached him and others and asked them to vote for a particular party. "But we didn't listen to him, and we gave our votes to those who deserved them," he said.

Ghazi Saad, a 50-year-old retired man, also said that a man outside his polling station was asking people to vote for his party as they went in.

Campaigning officially ended two days ago, and any party that breaks the no-lobbying rules is liable to a fine.

The local electoral commission spokesman denied the reports of violations. "As of 3 pm [two hours before polls closed], turnout was in excess of 80 per cent, and there were no violations or other noteworthy incidents," said spokesman Dhahir Habeeb.

Hussein Ali al-Yasiry, Meethaq Fadhil and Safaal Mansoor are IWPR trainee journalists in Iraq.

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