

Everyday Demands Drown Out Sectarianism

Iraqis say they spurned sectarian rivalries to vote for better services, an IWPR straw poll reveals. Iraqi voters say they want their next parliament to improve services and the economy rather than pursue the sectarian rivalries that were rekindled in the closing stages of the election campaign.

In a nationwide straw poll conducted by IWPR-trained reporters, Iraqis said they voted last Sunday, March 7, in the hope of achieving a better quality of life, citing in particular the need for reliable electricity, employment, sanitation and security.

Many interviewees emphasised that they wanted their leaders to unite the country and transcend the sectarian divisions that have been blamed for much of the recent bloodshed.

This despite an election campaign dominated by a dispute that underscored the schism between Sunni and Shia Arabs.

More than 140 candidates were banned in the run-up to the polls for their alleged ties to Saddam Hussein's banned Baath party, which in its heyday favoured Sunni Arabs and discriminated against the Shia.

Among those barred from this election were politicians popular with secular Shia voters and Sunni Arabs.

Opposition blocs said the so-called de-Baathification move harmed their prospects and exploited tensions between the Sunnis and Shia. Shia Islamist parties in government backed the ban and insisted it was not aimed at electoral gain.

Despite the overwhelming emphasis on services and security, IWPR's survey suggested that sectarian sympathies – defined loosely by region – were not entirely absent from voters' minds.

Shia Arab voters in the south tended to favour blocs led by Shia Islamist parties, while Sunni Arabs in the north and west backed lists that included prominent Sunni candidates. In other words, while voters in these regions had overwhelmingly secular demands, they nonetheless tended to choose candidates who were trusted by their sect.

Many voters also told IWPR they welcomed new ballot papers that enabled them to elect individual candidates as well as blocs, saying this would make their leaders more accountable and less prone to corruption.

BETTER ECONOMY, MORE PROSPERITY

Final results from the election are due within the next fortnight. With no single bloc likely to gain a majority, months of wrangling may precede the formation of parliamentary coalitions.

Whatever its form, the next government will face familiar demands: defeat sectarianism and improve services and security, as urged by voters in provincial council elections a year ago.

“We must turn away from the past with all its tragedies, killings and sectarian tension,” said Uday Abbas, a civil servant from Baghdad. “We can’t live without security. Iraqi blood is priceless.”

A Baghdad housewife, Um Mohammed, said she had voted because she was sick of worrying about her children’s safety.

“Whenever they go out, I am concerned for them. If I hear news of an explosion, I start crying until they come back home,” she said. “We want nothing but security. We are neither at war nor at peace.”

Although overshadowed by the de-Baathification row, the emphasis on better governance also featured prominently in the election campaign, with almost all major blocs promising to raise the standard of living and fight corruption.

Haider Ali Hassan, a resident of the southern city of Basra, said he had voted for Prime Minister’s Nuri al-Maliki’s coalition because it would “improve services and increase prosperity”. Maliki’s State of Law list is one of two major coalitions with a strong following among Shia voters.

Ali Salim Sarhan, a civil servant in Basra, said he had voted for a left-wing party that he hoped would ensure an equitable distribution of Iraq’s oil wealth, following the planned withdrawal of the United States military this year.

“The political climate will definitely improve, although we will face some hardships as this is a transitional period,” he said.

In northern and western provinces with a large Sunni Arab population, many voters said they had backed the Iraqiya list of former prime minister Iyad Allawi. The list, which includes several prominent Sunni Arab leaders, was the largest of the opposition blocs that claimed to have been unfairly targeted by the pre-election ban on candidates. Its supporters said they backed its secular stance, regarding it as a bulwark against sectarianism.

“I hope we can get rid of these religious people with the long beards,” said Abdulqadir Hussein, a university student from the western province of Anbar who voted for Iraqiya.

In Salahaddin, another Sunni Arab province, local resident Hatim Kareem Jamal said he had backed Iraqiya because he wanted better security and living conditions. “Allawi is honest and efficient and he is not sectarian,” he said.

HIGH HOPES FOR NEW VOTING SYSTEM

The emphasis on secular issues, such as good governance, was evident even among supporters of lists not generally seen as secular.

Saad Juni Mohammed, a civil servant from Basra, said he had voted for the Iraqi National Alliance, a list led by a powerful Shia Islamist party, because he wanted “pluralism” in politics. “I never have sectarian or religious motives,” he said.

In Diwaniya, a province in the Shia south, local resident Hassan Naeem said he had voted for the same list because its leader had cracked down on militias. “He also provided the city with services and brought it back to life,” he said.

In Baghdad, Suad Mohammed Khairalla, a government employee, said she had heeded election instructions from Iraq’s top council of Shia clerics, which told its followers they had a duty to vote but did not specify whom for. She said she wanted her leaders to be more accountable.

“We ask the winners to bear in mind that in four years’ time, they will return to us. Their destiny will be in our hands,” she said. “We won’t vote for those who were too busy with their party or tribe.”

In Najaf, Baqir al-Ethaari, a lawyer, said he remained suspicious of religious parties that had tried to rebrand themselves as nationalists. “I am against religion taking the seat of power,” he said.

Many voters said they had also participated in the election because they wanted to take advantage of a new system that allowed them to select individual candidates, as well as blocs. The previous election in 2005 only gave the option of choosing between different lists, because of fears that naming individual candidates on the ballot paper could compromise their security.

Saleh al-Kanani, a taxi driver from Diyala province, north of Baghdad, said he had picked a candidate from his area because he “feels my pain”.

“I didn’t vote for him because of his sect. I voted for him because of whom he is, and because I know him,” he said.

In Baghdad, Abbas Mahdi, a retired civil servant, said he hoped the new ballots would root out unsuitable incumbents who had been nominated by their blocs, rather than selected by the public.

“Now we can put the right person in the right place, so that we are no longer oppressed by corrupt and incompetent leaders,” he said.

IWPR-trained reporters in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Baquba, Najaf, Nasiriya, Kut, Tikrit and Falluja contributed to this report.

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