

Kurdish Ballot Rigging Row

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Parties in Iraqi Kurdistan accuse each other of election fraud.

Kurdish parties, including the two main political groups, are accusing each other of ballot violations after in the wake of their first democratic elections in decades.

The two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, have been trading barbs since the polls opened on January 30.

The Kurdistan Democratic Islamic Union and the independent Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party also joined the fray.

The PUK, KDP and the Kurdistan Democratic Islamic Union came together to form the Kurdish Alliance List coalition to run in the elections for the 275-member transitional National Assembly. But for local elections, including a new 111-member Kurdish parliament, the parties each campaigned separately.

Aso Ali, head of the PUK's Sulaimaniyah branch, said at some polling stations, voters were encouraged to vote for a certain party, which he declined to name.

"There have been [electoral] violations in Erbil, but we don't want to make the process ugly by talking about it," Ali said.

Erbil is the regional capital of the KDP-controlled area of Iraqi Kurdistan in the west while the eastern part is controlled by the PUK, and its regional capital is Sulaimaniyah.

Arif Taifoor, a senior KDP official in Sulaimaniyah, said the KDP will be holding a meeting with other parties about voter fraud, but the PUK will not be invited. He also blamed the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, IECI, saying, "They did not support us, and we have a word to say about their representatives."

A senior official of the electoral commission office in Sulaimaniyah, who declined to be named, said the commission started receiving complaints from parties all the way through election day.

"We followed up the breaches and some were true and some were untrue," the election official said. "But we don't have any tangible evidence and there is no smoke without fire. There might be some fraud, but how much, we don't know."

Jabar Mahmood, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party, said his party was aware of many breaches and they intended to submit a document detailing the violations to the electoral commission office.

"There were blank votes in the ballot box that were later marked in favour of the ruling party or for the Kurdish Alliance List," he said.

Mahmood admitted his party also committed fraud, as one of their party election observers offered to turn a blind eye to violations by other parties in exchange for three votes for his party.

The Sulaimaniyah electoral commission official also criticised the PUK and KDP for announcing preliminary results of the election in some cities of Iraqi Kurdistan.

“We haven’t announced any official statements,” he said. “Only the IECI in Baghdad is allowed to announce results officially.”

Despite the accusations by the Kurdish parties, one independent election monitor in Sulaimaniyah said voting was a success.

“There were no breaches from any party,” said Rizgar Mahmood Ali. “The process went very well.”

Talar Nadir is an IWPR trainee journalist in Iraq.

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