

Kurds Complain of Electoral Roll Mix-Up

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The omission of thousands of Kurds from voter lists is attributed to administrative error, but sparks deep-seated mistrust of Baghdad.

A carnival atmosphere dominated in Sulaimaniyah on election day, but when Khooshkan Fatih returned home from the polls, her mood was anything but festive.

The 25-year-old civil servant slipped off her traditional Kurdish clothing – a sequined dress many women put on especially for the election – wiped off her make-up and lay down to sleep.

Then she got angry. “This is what the Arabs are like,” she said. “Before, when they had power, they bombed us with chemical weapons. Now they remove our names [from the electoral rolls] so that we can't vote.”

Fatih was one of thousands of people in Iraq's northern Kurdish regions whose names were missing from official lists of voters for the national parliamentary election.

Election officials in Iraqi Kurdistan and the city of Kirkuk said they had sent voters' names to the headquarters of the Independent Electoral Commission in Iraq, IECI, in Baghdad. But when the IECI sent out the finalised lists, thousands of names were missing.

IECI and international officials said the names went missing due to technical error in Baghdad. But while such cases were not limited to Kurdish areas, the problems stirred deep-seated anti-Arab sentiment among Kurds, a persecuted community under Saddam Hussein's regime.

The problems started several days before the December 15 election in the ethnically mixed Kirkuk region. Election officials noticed that about 196,000 of the region's 691,410 registered voters were missing from official lists. Most of them were Kurds.

Kurdish officials in Kirkuk scrambled to get the names added to the lists. Most voters there were able to cast ballots on election day, but other regions experienced similar problems.

On election day, the names of 30,000 voters were missing from the voting list in the Kurdish-ruled northwestern province of Dahuk. Election officials there resorted to using voter lists from the January parliamentary election, which the IECI in Baghdad reportedly agreed to accept.

In Sulaimaniyah, as many as 10,000 voters' names were missing when the lists were sent out from Baghdad, local election officials reported. In Hawlea in the Kurdish city of Erbil, electoral staff estimated that several thousand voters' names were missing. Mosul, which is ethnically mixed, also experienced problems.

The mix-up has led some Kurds to suspect that the Baghdad government tried to marginalise them as a constituency.

"It is clear that this is a conspiracy against Kurds," said Dara Mohammed, a 20-year-old student in Sulaimaniyah. "The IECl in Baghdad made trouble for Kirkuk and Mosul. Now they've extended it to Sulaimaniyah and Erbil as well. But it's our [Kurdish] leaders' fault because they are soft on the Arabs."

Miran Ahmed, a 28-year-old day labourer, disagreed and argued that the missing votes probably wouldn't affect the final results anyway.

"The system wasn't well-organised," he said. "This wasn't a conspiracy against the Kurds," he said.

Barham Ahmed Salih, who heads the Kurdistan Alliance in Sulaimaniyah, said he asked United Nations representative Ashraf Qadhi to investigate the issue.

"People brought women in blankets and men on wheelbarrows, and I couldn't let them vote because I was forced to follow the rules," said Zana Raoof, coordinator of a voting centre in the city who had to turn away voters because their names were not on lists. "I went home frustrated."

The incidents cast a shadow over an otherwise positive election day in Iraq's Kurdish territories.

Election officials and monitors estimated voter turnout in Iraq's three Kurdish territories at 75 to 80 per cent. In Kirkuk, a majority Kurdish city that also has Arabs and Turkomans, turnout was estimated to be near the national average of 70 per cent. Monitors and electoral officials did not report any serious violations, unlike in January's elections and the October constitutional referendum.

The Kurdistan Alliance, which currently holds 77 seats in Iraq's 275-member parliament, was widely expected to take the lion's share of votes in Iraqi Kurdistan. Political analysts believe the alliance will lose some seats to Sunni Arab lists that are competing for the first time.

"We used to struggle with military force and bloody battles to realise our rights," said Salah Aziz, a 39 year-old shopkeeper. "Today the style of that struggle has changed to a political fight. We want to achieve our rights through ballot boxes."

The two main parties in the alliance, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan which runs the eastern region of Iraq's Kurdish territories and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, which controls the west, faced stiff criticism from some voters ahead of the election who accused them of corruption and of failing to provide basic services.

The Islamic Union of Kurdistan, the third most powerful Kurdish political party that ran with the Kurdistan Alliance in January, this time ran independently on a platform advocating a new, uncorrupt leadership.

"I voted to put an end to the power of the corrupt authorities, and so the rights of all groups can be justly realised," said Hero Salih, a 22 year-old student who endorsed the Islamic Union of Kurdistan.

The party's secretary-general, Salahadin Muhammed Bahaadin, and several of his staff and bodyguards were beaten by Kurdish security forces guarding a polling station when they went to vote in Erbil. Hama-Rasheed Mawati, a senior party member, said the ministry of interior arrested 41 police and members of the security forces at the polling station.

Four party members, including an official, were shot and killed by a policeman in Dahuk shortly before the elections.

"We expected the KDP would put pressure on us, but we didn't expect that it would attack us in such a manner," Mawati said of the polling centre incident.

The party said the attack "distorts the democratic experiment and political co-existence in Kurdistan".

Muhammed Mala Qadir, a KDP politburo member, said those who attacked the Islamic Union of Kurdistan must have been Kurdish nationalists who believed the party betrayed them by breaking with the alliance.

"We don't have any political or historical problems with the Islamic Union of Kurdistan," he said.

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